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SYRIA AND THE RISE OF RADICAL ISLAMIST GROUPS

by

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The Syrian uprising began as a secular, nationalist struggle in 2011 but gradually devolved into a vortex of sectarian warfare with more than 200,000 dead and another 10 million displaced. Amid the chaos, the radical Sunni Islamist groups Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State became the most prominent in the conflict. This thesis explores why and how the groups emerged in Syria, rose to power, and proliferated to unprecedented levels by tracing the progression of the Syrian conflict through three cycles of contestation: protest, insurgency, and civil war. Combining elements from social movement, insurgency, and radicalization theories as well as civil war literature, this thesis dissects the radical Islamist ideology, the institutional legacies from prior struggles, and the role of external sponsors; and places each in the context of the Syrian conflict.

History has proven that the radical Islamists fighting in Syria today are the next generation of leaders in the global jihad movement. Understanding their rise to power provides crucial insight to our future enemies. This thesis seeks to go beyond a recitation of facts and links multiple frameworks with the rise of the most powerful radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict.

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SYRIA AND THE RISE OF RADICAL ISLAMIST GROUPS

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Ahrar	Ahrar al Sham
AQ	al-Qaeda
AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DOD	Department of Defense
FIU	Financial Investigation Unit
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IF	Islamic Front
IO	Information Operations
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JAN	Jabhat al-Nusra
LCC	Local Committee Council
MANPADS	Man-Portable Air Defense Systems
SIF	Syrian Islamic Front
SILF	Syrian Islamic Liberation Front
SNC	Syrian National Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAR	United Arab Republic

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

When the Arab Spring erupted throughout the Middle East in 2010, it hit with unexpected force as Arab citizens demanded their freedom and liberty. Few could have guessed at its onset that the Arab Spring represented the harbinger of doom for authoritarian regimes. In less than a year, popular uprisings removed dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and in March 2011, the Arab Spring spread to the rural areas of Syria. Unlike other ousted regimes, Syria's Bashar al-Assad proved resilient, but the situation devolved from secular protests to an insurgency to a brutal civil war with as many as 200,000 dead to date and an additional 10 million people displaced, which accounts for roughly half of Syria's population.[1]

While the opposition began as secular, democratic, and nationalist in 2011, radical Islamist groups began taking hold in the unfolding chaos in 2012. By 2013, radical Sunni Islamist groups, or Salafi-jihadist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), Ahrar al Sham (Ahrar), and the Islamic State (IS), were firmly entrenched in the conflict.[2] Brian Jenkins from RAND warned that "the jihadists have become the cutting edge of the rebellion."[3] By 2014, few groups in the opposition were as visible and prominent as JAN, Ahrar, and

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[1] "The War in Syria: Can Hell Be Frozen Over?" *The Economist*, November 15, 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21632626-limited-un-ceasefire-plan-has-little-hope-success-can-hell-be-frozen-over.

[2] The terrorist organization known as the Islamic State has undergone a considerable amount of name changes over the years, which often leads to confusion. The group's original name was al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. Its founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi changed it to al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, more commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), in 2004. AQI rebranded its name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006, and once its leaders decided to expand into Syria, they changed the group name yet again to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Some experts also refer to ISIS as ISIL, which refers to the al-Sham portion of its name as the Levant. Some also refer to the group as *Da'ish* or *Daesh*, its acronym in Arabic. In mid-2014, the group changed its name to the Islamic State, which has been resoundingly condemned by Muslims and others around the world. Regardless, this thesis will use the current name the Islamic State (IS) when referring to the group since that is how the group refers to itself. This is in no way meant to imply endorsement or acknowledgement of the terrorist group's legitimacy as an actual state.

[3] Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013), 3, http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT402 html.

IS, and leaders in the U.S. intelligence community rated all three groups as "the most effective opposition forces" fighting in Syria.[4]

This thesis seeks to better understand the rise of radical Sunni Islamist groups in Syria. How did they proliferate and thrive in a conflict that began as a secular, nationalist struggle? Why have these groups overshadowed the secular opposition? What are the resultant policy implications or recommendations for the U.S. government?

B.   SIGNIFICANCE

The Syrian conflict presents a vexing situation for the United States. While the U.S. government would normally welcome the demise of the al-Assad regime, the rise of radical Islamist groups in the current conflict paralyzed any quick U.S. response. Once the conflict turned violent in 2011, many security experts clamored for the West, especially the United States, to arm the notoriously fragmented and unorganized secular opposition. However, an equal number of experts expressed caution in 2012 that any Western supplied arms could end up in the hands of the radical Islamists. This fear was compounded by the concern that the current batch of radical Islamists in Syria could represent the next generation of global terrorists. Prior to 2014, the situation represented a catch 22 for the United States; however, once IS began making blitzkrieg-style gains in Iraq and Syria, the United States was forced to respond.

In September, U.S. President Barak Obama outlined his four-pronged strategy to destroy IS in Syria and Iraq, which now has been extended to other jihadist groups such as JAN.[5] A tenet of President Obama's strategy is to "strengthen the [Syrian] opposition as the best counterweight to extremists like IS, while pursuing the political solution necessary to solve Syria's crisis once and for all."[6] The dilemma is the overall estimated strength of the insurgency in Syria ranges "between 75,000 or 80,000 up to 110,000 or

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[4] Christopher Blanchard, Carla Humud, and Mary Beth Nikitin, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response* (CRS Report No. RL33487) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 17, 2014), 3, http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf.

[5] The White House, "Statement by the President on ISIL," news release, September 10, 2014, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/remarks-president-barack-obama-address-nation.

[6] Ibid.

115,000 insurgents, who are organized into more than 1,500 groups of widely varying political leanings," according to the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper.[7] Among the dizzying array of opposition groups, the radical Islamists are some of the largest and most powerful. While estimates vary and group affiliation can be fluid, the CIA estimates IS's strength as 20,000 to 31,500.[8] According to *The Economist*, Ahrar's estimated strength is 10,000 to 20,000.[9] RAND estimates JAN's strength as 5,000 to 6,000.[10] If the United States hopes to defeat the most extreme factions and support friendly opposition elements, it is vital to understand who the "extremists" are.

This thesis will have well-timed policy implications. First, it will show what conditions led to a fertile environment for the rise of radical Islamist groups. If the United States has a better understanding of the causes, it can potentially provide a better diagnosis of the problem. Second, there is a tendency to treat radical Islamist groups as a homogenous entity. Close analysis may reveal that they are not monolithic, and some groups may require different instruments of power other than a military option to be defeated. Understanding the roots of the prominent radical Islamist groups will help to explain what they truly represent.

This thesis will also benefit military planners. As the United States ramps up its strategy in Syria, Department of Defense (DOD) planners must contrive contingency war plans. This thesis will help DOD planners to better understand the major players involved and the operating environment. Lastly, from an academic perspective, most literature on the Syrian conflict profiles the various insurgent groups, provides historical synopses of events, or explains fleeting moments in the conflict. This thesis seeks to go beyond a recitation of facts by applying multiple theoretical constructs to identify causation and fill key analytical gaps.

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[7] Blanchard et al., *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, 3.

[8] Richard Barrett, *The Islamic State* (Washington, DC: The Soufan Group, 2014), 10, http://soufangroup.com/the-islamic-state/.

[9] "Competition among Islamists," *The Economist*, July 20, 2013, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21582037-one-islamist-rebel-group-seems-have-overtaken-all-others-competition-among.

[10] Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), 9, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf>.

C.   LITERATURE REVIEW

1.   Introduction

Islam is one religion with many interpretations. As a result, the terms "Islamism" and "radical Islamism" have wide ranging connotations and must be defined. The International Crisis Group views Islamism "as synonymous with Islamic activism" and defines it as "the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character."[11]   Mohammed Hafez distinguishes between peaceful Islamic activism and radical Islamism by asserting that radical Islamism "entails an ideological commitment to establish an Islamic state … and a strategic commitment to engage in violent mobilization."[12]   The dividing line between Islamists and radical Islamists is the use of violence to achieve their aims. This thesis will focus on radical Islamist groups, and a more thorough examination of their ideology is addressed in Chapter III.

The rise of radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict can be analyzed through numerous theoretical constructs due to the evolution of the uprising from protests to insurgency to civil war; thus, elements of social movement theory, insurgency theory, and civil war literature apply. Additionally, radicalization theory has the potential to offer additional insights by complementing aspects of social movement theory to explain the process of violent radicalization. This section will systematically review the following fields of study and derive applicable factors to assist with analysis: social movement theory, radicalization theory, insurgency theory, and civil war literature.

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[11] *Understanding Islamism* (Washington, DC: International Crisis Group, 2005), 1, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/037-understanding-islamism.aspx.

[12] Mohammed M. Hafez, "Illegitimate Governance: The Roots of Islamist Radicalization in the MENA," in *Governance in the Middle East and North Africa,* ed. Abbas Kadhim (New York: Routledge, 2012), 86.

2.   Social Movement Theory

Three broad factors form the basis of social movement theory: political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framing.[13] Beginning with political opportunities, Sydney Tarrow defines the concept as "consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure."[14] Essentially, structural changes occur or are perceived as occurring in the external environment that directly correlates to enhanced opportunity, which tips the risk versus gain scale towards collective action. In the case of Syria, the civil war is the most obvious political opportunity that created space for the rise of Islamist groups; however, as this thesis will demonstrate, other nuanced clusters of opportunities occurred that provide more analytic clarity than simply citing the civil war as the root cause for the Islamist mobilization and development.

According to Doug McAdam, mobilizing structures are defined as "those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action."[15] Unlike the notoriously fragmented Syrian secular opposition, radical Islamist groups have made efficient use of private and public ties at the local, regional, and global levels to acquire and consolidate leadership, manpower, and valuable resources such as financing and weapons; however, as Hafez stressed, "formal mobilization structures are rarely the starting point for social movement activism."[16] As a result, this thesis will pay careful attention to pre-existing informal mobilization structures and networks that catapulted Islamist groups to the forefront of the uprising.

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[13] Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes—Toward a Sythetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings,* ed. Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

[14] David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," *Social Forces 82*, no. 4 (June 2004): 1459.

[15] McAdam et al., "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes," 3.

[16] Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2007), 21.

David Snow defines framing as "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action."[17]   According to Glenn Robinson, "framing is the bumper-sticker version of how issues get interpreted within a certain ideological context."[18] Framing is a way for groups to translate grievances into action by promoting "a specific version of reality and to make this version resonate with the worldview of potential recruits."[19]   In order for frames to be effective, they must resonate with the target audience by tapping into master narratives, which Jeffrey Halverson et al. define as "transhistorical narratives that are deeply embedded in a particular culture."[20] Generally, framing strategies contain three core types of frames: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. By using carefully crafted frames that diagnose specific problems, proffer solutions, and motivate collective action, radical Islamist groups make themselves more appealing to potential recruits, legitimize their actions, and create an insurgent consciousness.

The power of the social movement theory framework over other approaches is it captures analytical factors at multiple levels. It combines structural issues with group level factors while accounting for cultural influences. Social movement theory provides a context to understanding the "why" and the "how" of group emergence, identifies patterns of mobilization, and gives indications of a group's staying power. Lastly, it shows how groups organize before mobilizing and illustrates their pathway to insurgency.

3.   Radicalization Theory

Since this thesis is concerned with the rise of radical Islamist groups, it is necessary to explore radicalization theory, which overlaps with elements of social movement theory. Risa Brooks defines radicalization as a "transformative process or a

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[17] McAdam et al., "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes," 6.

[18] Glenn Robinson, "Hamas as Social Movement," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 116.

[19] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 802.

[20] Jeffry R. Halverson, Steven Corman, and H.L. Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

conjunction of behavioral and belief changes that may precede an individual's engagement in terrorist activity."[21] Dissecting Brooks' definition reveals a couple of important observations: while there are trigger factors and sources of grievances, radicalization is a process, not a single event, and the process precedes violent action by reducing obstacles for those who are radical leaning to embark on a path of violence through various pathways or mechanisms.

Applying a social movement approach to radicalization provides a dynamic view by focusing on how people gradually evolve into terrorists. A key tenet of social movement theory is grievances alone do not trigger violent action; rather, violent radicals are bred through "a social process that results from interaction with and within a radical group—a process by which the individual is gradually convinced that the perceived injustices require the individual to engage personally and that violence is religiously sanctioned."[22] Thus, radical groups are rational actors that operationally design and employ strategies to progressively transition activists towards violence using existing social contacts and networks.

Many prominent scholars such as Quintan Wiktorowicz and Marc Sageman espouse theoretical models of radicalization with a social movement and network focus to provide insight to the process of how a person can become radicalized to join a violent Islamist group. Wiktorowicz promotes a linear model of radicalization that consists of four stages: cognitive opening, religious seeking, frame alignment, and socialization.[23]

Wiktorowicz defines a cognitive opening as a crisis or experience dealing with discrimination, victimization, or humiliation that causes a person to be receptive to radical ideas.[24] Religious seeking entails a person being more receptive to religion and open to the worldviews espoused by radical groups. Frame alignment occurs when a

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[21] Risa Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 12.

[22] Ibid., 802.

[23] Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (September 2011): 605.

[24] Ibid.

person believes his or her views correspond to the group. During frame alignment, radical groups actively employ framing strategies to increase the likelihood of alignment. Lastly, socialization and joining entails a person "officially joining a group, embracing the ideology, and adopting the group identity."[25]

Sageman agrees with some of Wiktorowicz's factors but favors a non-linear process that consists of four prongs when combined in any order help to explain the radicalization process. The four factors are "a sense of moral outrage, a specific interpretation of the world, resonance with personal experiences, and mobilization through networks."[26] Similar to Wiktorowicz's model, radicalization begins with a cognitive event that is perceived to be a major moral violation that elicits outrage and ends with interactions with a social movement that has organizational capability and an ideological base that resonates with a recruit.

The implication that both scholars point to is that a trigger event can increase the likelihood of attraction towards a violent ideology. In the case of the Syrian uprising, there are numerous examples of regime brutality that constituted major moral violations on the Sunni population to trigger the radicalization process. Both Sageman and Wiktorowicz's models provide the basis of a framework to examine how radical groups in Syria have bolstered their numbers.

4.   Insurgency Theory

As with many aspects of the Syrian conflict, the evolution from non-violent protests to an armed insurgency was more of a process than a precise moment. An important distinction when analyzing radical Islamist groups in general is that they simultaneously function as both social movements and insurgent groups. Unlike social movement theory, insurgency theory does not offer a precise framework, but just as with radicalization theory, elements of insurgency theory can greatly assist with not only disaggregating the radical groups but also specifying their strengths, weaknesses, and

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[25] King and Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists," 606.

[26] Marc Sageman, "A Strategy for Fighting International Islamist Terrorists," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 225.

cohesion. Additionally, insurgency theory provides a framework to analyze various insurgent typologies, organizational design, and strategies.

Bard O'Neill identifies seven types of insurgencies: anarchist, egalitarian, traditionalist, pluralist, secessionist, reformist, and preservationist.[27] Based on the goals of radical Islamist groups in Syria, the traditionalist category, which is defined as insurgents that "seek to displace the political system, but the values they articulate are primordial and sacred ones, rooted in ancestral ties and religion," is most applicable to this thesis.[28] According to Richard Shultz, revolutionary-minded insurgents like traditionalists combine the following list of elements for sustaining an insurgency: ideology; leadership; mass base; logistics; organizational apparatus; political, psychological, and paramilitary tactics; and external linkages/assistance; however, Shultz stresses that the combination of ideology, leadership, and organization are the most crucial.[29] O'Neill's typology and Shultz's elements provide an initial start to apply insurgency theory, but more clarity and specificity is needed from an organizational and strategy standpoint.

In Paul Staniland's recent book *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, he examines how insurgent groups are organized. He categorizes them in four types: integrated, vanguard, parochial, and fragmented. Integrated groups are characterized by "leadership unity and discipline at the center and high levels of local compliance on the ground;" thus, they have excellent command and control of forces.[30] Integrated groups are the most cohesive, effective, and resilient. Vanguard groups have strong central control but weak local ties. They are dominated by elites without strong links to local communities. According to Staniland, when JAN and IS began operations

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[27] Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd edition (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 17–21.

[28] Ibid., 18.

[29] Richard Shultz, *Global Insurgency Strategy and the Salafi Jihad Movement* (Colorado Springs, CO: Institute for National Security Studies, 2008), 25, http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA482684.

[30] Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 6.

in Syria, both resembled vanguard groups that transitioned to integrated groups.[31] Parochial groups contain weak central control but robust local control. Staniland explains that parochial groups "resemble a coalition of distinct suborganizations; even if they are loosely held together by a central leader, he or she lacks consistent control over major commanders," which epitomizes Syria's largest secular opposition entity the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and in some ways the largest Salafi bloc the Islamic Front.[32] The last type is fragmented groups that have neither central nor local control.

Aside from typologies, Staniland stresses that pre-war networks, which he refers to as "social bases," often determine the structure of a group.[33] The social bases may or may not be violent in nature and seem to resemble the concept of mobilizing structures from social movement theory; thus, identifying the prewar networks or institutional legacies of the main radical Islamist groups in Syria should provide valuable insight to their organizational design, military effectiveness, and corresponding strategy.

Organizational design can clearly inhibit or expand strategy options. There are two general insurgent strategies: a traditional Maoist strategy and a conventional strategy. The primary goal of the Maoist strategy is "to engage the government in long, costly wars of attrition in which insurgents rely on subversive tactics—both violent and nonviolent— to lower the morale and raise the costs of war for the government."[34] According to O'Neill, a Maoist strategy consists of three phases: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic offensive.[35] The crux of the Maoist strategy is to wage a protracted war while garnering the popular support of the people, which makes political

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[31] Paul Staniland, "Insurgent Organization and State-Armed Group Relations," in The Political Science of Syria's War (Washington, DC: the Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 38, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, 17.

[34] Seth G. Jones and Patrick B. Johnston, "The Future of Insurgency," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 1 (2013): 5.

[35] O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 35–36.

and propaganda strategies just as important as military.[36] Maoist style insurgencies tend to dominate rural environments, which appears similar to JAN and Ahrar's strategy.

According to Seth Jones and Patrick Johnston, the second strategy is a conventional strategy that involves "skipping Mao's first two stages and focusing on conventional military action against the government."[37] Insurgents waging a conventional strategy perceive their organizational strength and resources to be greater or equal to government forces, and as a result, the focus for the conventional insurgent is to seize cities and govern territory, which seems to resemble IS's strategy. Garnering popular support is not seen as a prerequisite, and rather than the small hit and run style tactics of a Maoist, conventional insurgents conduct large-scale operations.

Combining both strategies with Staniland's typologies stresses the necessity that an insurgent group's organizational design needs to match the operational environment, and each group needs some semblance of a safe haven as a base. Abdulkader Sinno defines a safe haven as "a portion of the contested territory where an organization's rivals cannot intervene with enough force to disturb its operations."[38] There is no lack of safe havens in the rural areas of Syria. This provides a potentially interesting aspect to analyze because JAN, Ahrar, and IS each have different organizational designs and each operate from different strands of safe havens.

5.   Civil War Literature

According to Fotini Christia, civil war is defined as "an internal armed conflict, directed against the government of a sovereign state, which has caused at least 1,000 cumulative battle related deaths."[39] With a death toll of over 200,000, Syria has long surpassed the numerical threshold; however, just as with identifying when the insurgency

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[36] Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002), 42.

[37] Jones and Johnston, "The Future of Insurgency," 5.

[38] Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and beyond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 44.

[39] Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

began, the exact moment when the conflict transitioned to a civil war is equally murky. Joseph Holliday, a former senior research analyst from the Institute for the Study of War, points to the summer of 2012 as the critical timeframe.[40]   Regardless of when it happened, James Fearon categorizes the Syrian civil war as one of the "most intense of around 150 civil wars since 1945."[41]   As a result, civil war literature has the potential to provide valuable insights to analyzing the radical groups in the Syrian conflict in two key areas: the impact of group fragmentation and external sponsors.

In multi-party civil wars where the opposition is fragmented and the government is unable to control major portions of the country, the dynamic encourages people to flee to areas dominated by their respective identity group, which reinforces sectarian cleavages.[42] The civil wars in Lebanon and Afghanistan illustrate the point, and the same situation has occurred in Syria. Additionally, the more intense and vicious the war becomes, the impetus for retaliation increases because powerful factions must maintain credibility in the eyes of their fighters and supporters as well as their opponents. A consequence of the escalating situation is mistrust between the various factions increases because none of the warring parties believe the other would honor a cease-fire and fear that if they demobilize, the other side will not.[43]   Thus, group fragmentation has two adverse impacts: it thrusts identity and ideological differences to the forefront, and the longer and more barbaric a civil war becomes, the less likely groups are to agree to a compromised solution, which extends the conflict. The cumulative effect is that ideology and identity as well as power distribution become critical factors.[44]

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[40] Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2013), 7, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime.

[41] James Fearon, "Syria's Civil War," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: the Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 13, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

[42] Fotini Christia, "What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: the Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 9, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

[43] Fearon, "Syria's Civil War," 14.

[44] Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*, 6.

Often, the more sectarianism is stressed, the more it is framed as an existential threat to one's identity, which can draw funding and recruits from outside sources. To complicate the situation in Syria further, "the ideological dimension of the Syrian civil war overlaps with a geopolitical conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran over domination of the Arab world," according to Laia Balcells and Stathis Kalyvas; therefore, Syria has an element of being a proxy war between regional rivals.[45] Christia adds that the flow of foreign support in civil wars leads to longer conflicts and favors groups that have stronger social ties and effective organizational mechanisms to absorb the external resources.[46] Additionally, the local causes of the conflict become intertwined with regional interests.

The implication for both group fragmentation and external sponsors is that the number of "veto players" increases dramatically, which David Cunningham defines as "actors that have the capability to unilaterally block settlement of a civil war."[47] Christia extends the concept of veto players further by referring to radical Islamists in the Syrian conflict as local "spoilers" because they "have no interest in seeing the conflict coming to an end."[48] Overall, civil war literature provides a bleak and depressing outlook for the future of Syria's civil war but highlights the necessity of understanding group fragmentation and the debilitating impact of external sponsors, which favor strong sectarian identities.

6.   Conclusion

This literature review demonstrated the multi-faceted nature of the Syrian conflict. It has evolved through three phases of contestation: protest, insurgency, and civil war. Elements of all of the outlined theories provide theoretical frameworks to analyze different aspects of the rise of radical Islamist groups in Syria, and this thesis contends

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[45] Laia Balcells and Stathis Kalyvas, "Technology of Rebellion in the Syrian Civil War," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: the Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 12, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

[46] Christia, "What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict," 10.

[47] David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War in Syria," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: the Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 26, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

[48] Christia, "What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict," 10.

that any viable explanation must contain a combination of the reviewed literature. By fusing different disciplines, this thesis expands on the reviewed theories.

D.   POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Overall, the focus of analysis in this thesis is the three main radical Islamist groups: Ahrar, JAN, and IS that operate at the meso level. This thesis explores how each group links to the societal and individual levels through their different strategies. The dependent variable for this thesis is the rise of the aforementioned radical Islamist groups, specifically in the context of the Syrian conflict. Since this thesis focuses on analyzing the rise of radical groups during a specific event, the following hypotheses sacrifice parsimony for specificity to enhance the explanatory power. Based on the literature review, each theory stressed that the following variables had to come together and reinforce each other for any group to emerge, grow, and prosper: opportunity, ideology, organization, resources, and sponsors. In this thesis, I limit the factors to ideology, organization, and sponsors, and each forms the basis for subsequent hypotheses to explain the rise of radical Islamist groups in Syria.

1.   Hypothesis 1: Ideology

The rise and success of radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict is due to ideological appeal. There is no shortage of scholars and politicians that cite Islam as the root cause of the rise in Islamist groups as a whole around the world. This notion fits with Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Theory, Bernard Lewis' assertions in "The Roots of Muslims Rage," and Mark Juergensmeyer's "Cosmic War" explanation.[49] Additionally, Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamal demonstrated that religion was an important rallying call during the Arab Spring uprisings, and Daniel Byman stated that

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[49] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993); Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic*, September 1, 1990, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

religion is a vital component to insurgencies containing Islamist groups.[50] While the above scholars point to the influence of Islam in general, they do not specify the attraction of radical Islamism. By exploring the possibility of the ideological appeal of radical Islamist groups in Syria, I attempt to go beyond a simple ideological explanation and explore other factors that can contribute to the likelihood of an extreme ideology resonating in the context of the Syrian conflict.

2.   Hypothesis 2: Experience, Organization, and Strategy

The rise and success of radical Islamist groups is a result of their organizational and strategic coherence based on institutional legacies. In the book *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, Raphael Lefèvre traces the revival of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood since their decimation by the Syrian regime in Hama, Syria in 1982.[51] Lefèvre's book demonstrates that Islamist groups and radical offshoots have established both formal and informal networks throughout Syria over the past 30 years and received invaluable experiences in the global jihad movement in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition to Lefèvre's conclusions, researchers from numerous think tanks and policy institutes such as Elizabeth O'Bagy, Aron Lund, and Azeem Ibrahim have also cited the robust logistics networks built by al-Qaeda affiliates fighting in the Iraq war in the mid-2000s.[52] The combination of all these factors makes the assertion that radical Islamist groups are not only tapping into institutional legacies but also had considerable prior experience dealing with the Syrian regime that the secular opposition did not.

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[50] Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamal, "How Islam Mattered in the Arab Uprisings," *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/17/how-islam-mattered-in-the-arab-uprisings; Daniel Byman, "Fighting *Salafi-Jihadist* Insurgencies: How Much Does Religion Really Matter?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 5 (May 2013).

[51] Raphael Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[52] Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012), http://www.understandingwar.org/report/jihad-syria; Aron Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front* (Stockholm, Sweden: the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2013), www.ui.se/eng/upl/files/86861.pdf; Azeem Ibrahim, *The Resurgence of al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq* (Carlyle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1210.

3. Hypothesis 3: External Sponsors

Formal and informal external sponsors incentivized sectarian identities, which favored radical Islamist groups. According to Curtis Ryan, Syria represents "the new Arab Cold War," which is a historical reference to inter-Arab power struggles from the 1950s till the 1970s.[53] The 21st century has witnessed three traditional centers of power in the Middle East: Egypt, Iraq, and Syria greatly diminish in prominence while other regional players surged to the forefront, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia.[54] A strong religious and ideological element accompanies this interstate competition that pits Sunni against Shia. As groups in Syria compete for external support and resources, they adopt an ideological outlook that matches their donors. This dynamic discourages groups to unite since they do not need each other for support, and as the conflict intensifies, groups become more outwardly sectarian, which uniquely suites radical Islamist groups.

E.   THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

Rather than emphasize one hypothesis over another, this thesis contends that each hypothesis provides a critical piece to a three-part puzzle explaining the rise of radical Islamist groups. As a result, each hypothesis forms the basis of separate chapters. Overall, this thesis consists of six chapters. Prior to delving into the three hypotheses, Chapter II provides a historical overview of how Syria evolved from its independence in 1946 till the present. It links Syria's history to the events that led to the current uprising and identifies specific opportunities that gave the Islamists unprecedented space to mobilize and emerge in Syria. Chapter II sets the foundation for why Syria was a fertile environment for radical Islamists and provides a historical backdrop for the remaining chapters.

Chapters III, IV, and V systematically address each hypothesis. I explore the foundation of the radical Islamist ideology in Chapter III and use elements of radicalization theory and cultural framing from social movement theory as an analytical

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[53] Curtis Ryan, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria," *Middle East Report* 262, vol. 42 (Spring 2012) http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria.

[54] Ibid.

framework to examine the ideological appeal of radical Islamist groups in the context of the Syrian civil war. I argue that a combination of the Salafi-jihadi ideology with a Sunni population polarized by indiscriminate regime repression presented a fertile environment for the framing strategies employed by Ahrar, JAN, and IS.

I examine in Chapter IV how the institutional legacies of Syria's radical Islamists affected the mobilization and strategies of Ahrar, JAN, and IS. Using the concepts of mobilizing structures and repertoires of contention from social movement theory as well as aspects of insurgency theory, I demonstrate that the remnants of prior struggles gave the radical Islamists a significant advantage from a leadership, manpower, and tactics perspective. I use elements from social movement and insurgency theories as well as civil war literature in Chapter V to explore the role of external sponsors in the Syrian conflict. I conclude that while geostrategic politics of the region incentivized sectarian identities, Gulf donors at the state and non-state levels disproportionately favored radical Islamist groups in the Syrian opposition, which facilitated the rise of radical Islamists from a resources perspective. I summarize all findings in Chapter VI and make specific policy recommendations.

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II.   HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Following World War I, Syria was one of the most politically unstable countries in the region. When Hafez al-Assad seized power in 1970, he pacified the country by creating a cohesive ruling elite reinforced by a highly repressive security apparatus. When his son Bashar entered office in 2000, he tried to enact economic reforms within a system that was not designed for change, with disastrous consequences. This chapter has three goals: to trace the historical roots of the challenges Syria faces today, to identify how they relate to the Syrian uprising, and to specify what factors promoted the initial rise of radical Islamist groups at the structural level once the uprising began. I assert that a combination of political repression, socio-economic issues, and inspiration from the Arab Spring were the driving factors for the start of the uprising, and once the uprising started, the fragmented opposition and the regime's counter-insurgent strategy created unprecedented space for radical Islamist groups to mobilize.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. The first section details Syria's early history as a French mandate, its unstable post-independence period from 1946 till 1970, and Hafez al-Assad's consolidation of power from 1970 until 2000. The second section explains why the Syrian uprising started and uses political opportunity structures from social movement theory as a tool to identify structural factors after the uprising began that transformed Syria into an ideal breeding ground for radical Islamist groups.

A.   SYRIA'S TURBULENT EARLY HISTORY

According to James Gelvin, "healthy states exhibit three characteristics: a territory, a functioning government, and a national identity, and weak states normally lack at least two of the above characteristics."[55] When Syria achieved its independence from France in 1946, it epitomized Gelvin's weak state diagnosis, which has relevance to the conflict today. The origins of its territorial boundaries were controversial, its central government was dysfunctional, and its national identity was weak.

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[55] James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 73–74.

Syria had not consisted of defined boundaries in the Western sense prior to the conclusion of World War I. From 1516 until 1916, Syria was a province in the Ottoman Empire, but its borders were amorphous, as were all the territories under the empire. According to Ayse Tekdal Fildis, Ottoman Syria ranged from "Aqaba and the Sinai on the south, the Taurus Mountains on the north, the Syrian Desert on the east, and the Mediterranean Sea on the west—currently comprising Jordan, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon and Syria."[56] Thus, Ottoman Syria was more of a geographic entity, commonly referred to as "*Bilad al-Sham*" (Greater Syria), consisting of the entire Levant region where its heterogeneous population coalesced in relative peace compared to the conflict prone dynamic today.

Prior to the end of World War I, Britain and France made a secret pact in 1916 known as the Sykes–Picot Agreement to split the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire into areas under their control.[57] The territorial borders of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan among others are traced directly to Sykes–Picot. The controversy with the agreement was that Britain previously assured influential Arab leaders they would gain independence over Arab lands following World War I if they revolted against the Ottoman Empire through a series of diplomatic exchanges.[58] Throughout the discussions, the Arabs embraced self-determination and promoted the spread of Arab nationalism in the region. When Britain failed to live up to its end of the bargain and Sykes–Picot was announced, the Arabs understandably felt deceived. To this day, many Arabs consider the modern borders of the Levant to be a product of Western colonial ambitions and a symbol of betrayal. To illustrate the depth of their anger, Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville explained, "Every Syrian schoolchild is brought up to hate the Sykes–Picot Agreement of

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[56] Ayse Tekdal Fildis, "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by the French Divide and Rule," Middle East Policy Council XVIII, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 1, http://www mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/troubles-syria-spawned-french-divide-and-rule.

[57] Arthur Goldschmidt Jr. and Lawrence Davidson, "The Roots of Arab Bitterness," in *The Contemporary Middle East: A Westview Reader*, ed. Karl Yambert (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), 46.

[58] The diplomatic exchanges took place from 1915 until 1916 and are historically known as the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence.

1916," which ensures the memory of the event is seared into the minds of future generations.[59]

Following World War I, the League of Nations concurred with the Sykes–Picot Agreement and declared Syria a French mandate from 1920 until its independence in 1946. The purpose of the mandate system was for "an advanced state … to tutor a less advanced state in the complexities of democratic self-government until it was ready to rule itself."[60]   However, the French had other plans. According to Fildis, France's primary interests in Syria were to "preserve century-old ties with the Syrian Catholics, gain a strategic and economic base in the eastern Mediterranean, ensure a cheap supply of cotton and silk, and prevent Arab nationalism from infecting France's North African empire."[61]   Rather than develop Syria politically and economically for its eventual independence, France treated it as a quasi-colony and employed its infamous divide-and-rule strategy.

To prevent Syrian autonomy and suppress Arab nationalism among the Sunni majority, France divided Greater Syria into administrative areas and disproportionately empowered minority groups. For example, France created Lebanon as a Christian-client state and granted the Alawites and Druze their own autonomous regions in modern day Syria. In exchange for their support, France relied heavily on the Alawites and Druze to fill key positions in the "Special Troupes of the Levant," which France used to enforce its rule in the other areas that consisted of Sunni majorities and to subdue local rebellions.[62] This dynamic significantly raised sectarian tensions and hindered the development of a united Syrian identity. When Syria gained independence in 1946, it had underdeveloped state institutions with no central authority and poor infrastructure for economic

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[59] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 14.

[60] Fildis, "The Troubles in Syria," 5.

[61] Ibid., 1.

[62] Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 4.

development. It was basically "a geographic expression with no unified political identity or community."[63]

B.   POST-INDEPENDENCE: 1946–1970

The legacies of France's divide-and-rule strategy combined with seismic shifts in the region crippled Syria until 1970. Just two years after independence, Syria and its Arab allies were humiliated by their defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, which resulted in the creation of the state of Israel. Following the loss, Syria experienced its first military coup. From 1948 to 1970, Syria fell victim to 10 successful coups, which is a record high in the Middle East.[64]   Each successive government faced the same dilemmas: how to unify the country, how to effectively govern it, and how to produce a stable economy.

With a population ranging in upwards of 75 percent Sunni, 13 percent Alawite, 10 percent Christian, and 4 percent Druze, Syrian leaders promoted Arab nationalism as a political identity, which served two purposes.[65]   First, it stressed "Arabness" over an immediate sectarian identity and harkened back to the Greater Syria narrative when Syrians peacefully co-existed. Second, it gave Syrian leaders justification to outsource political and economic assistance from Arab neighbors. The United Arab Republic (UAR) is the most prominent example.

From 1958 until 1961, Syria merged with Egypt to form the UAR. According to Eberhard Kienle, the UAR was "the only instance in which Syrians entirely surrendered their sovereignty, their power, and their freedom…to non-Syrians," which exemplifies how desperate Syrian leaders became to find a solution for unity and stable governance.[66] While the UAR existed for only three years, it had a lasting impact because Egypt

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[63] Housam Darwisheh, *Syria and the Arab Spring: Unraveling the Road to Syria's Protracted Conflict* (Seoul, South Korea: the Asian Institute for Policy Studies, 2013), 2, http://en.asaninst.org/contents/issue-brief-no-44-syria-and-the-arab-spring-unraveling-the-road-to-syrias-protracted-conflict.

[64] James Gelvin, "Syria: Coup Proof?" *History Today* 8, vol. 61 (August 2011): 34.

[65] "The World Factbook: Syria," Central Intelligence Agency, June 20, 2014, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html; M. Zuhdi Jasser, "Sectarian Conflict in Syria," *Prism* 4, vol. 4, Syria Supplemental (2014): 61.

[66] Eberhard Kienle, "Arab Unity Schemes Revisited: Interest, Identity, and Policy in Syria and Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East* Studies 1, vol. 27 (February 1995): *56.*

instituted its brand of socialism and state-based economy as well as introduced elements of an authoritarian system of rule in Syria.[67] For example, all political parties were banned in the UAR, which laid the foundation for one party rule under the Baathists. According to Steven Heydemann, the UAR was "the crucible within which many elements of the Baath's political repertoire took shape."[68]

While minority groups such as the Alawites were favored during the French mandate period, after independence, the majority Sunnis excluded them from government positions for colluding with the French. As a result, Alawites had few opportunities for advancement in Syrian society aside from joining the military, which the more affluent Sunnis opted out of by paying a fee. According to Mordechai Nisan, "In the 1950s, the Alawites began to consolidate a strategy that combined upward mobility within the Syrian armed forces with membership in the politically radical Baath nationalist party."[69] This combination eventually placed Alawites in the center of Syrian power struggles. During the UAR period, the military committee of the Baath party with Alawite representation led the opposition to the Syrian–Egyptian union, and the same military committee led the Baathist coup in 1963.[70]

Baathism as an ideology combines socialism, secularism, and Arab nationalism. Its appeal was obvious for Syria; it tapped into prevailing ideologies of the time and offered a framework to unify the diverse population. Once the Baathists seized power in 1963, they expanded on the Egyptian socialist programs by initiating aggressive land reforms, which formally linked the rural peasants to the state. They also nationalized major sectors of the economy, which alienated the traditional merchant communities. The effect was a shift in the balance of power in Syria from the urban elite to a rural ruling class. After Syria and its Arab allies were defeated in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, the

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[67] Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 85.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Mordechai Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2002), 120.

[70] Ibid., 121.

Baath party split over the direction of its domestic programs, and Hafez al-Assad, who controlled the armed forces, led what would become Syria's final coup in late 1970.[71]

C.   THE RULE OF HAFEZ AL-ASSAD

When Hafez al-Assad solidified his rule in 1970, he became the first Alawite president of Syria. As the son of a poor Alawite family, his rise to power was nothing short of extraordinary. The political acumen he developed by deftly maneuvering the complex political landscape as an Air Force officer served him well. Once in office, al-Assad undertook a process James Quinlivan from RAND refers to as "coup proofing," which consisted of a series of steps to consolidate power and prevent future military coups.[72]   Al-Assad's strategy relied on three imperatives: the placement of Alawite family members and regime loyalists in coup-critical positions, the creation of a loyal Sunni business class, and the development of a parallel military and multiple internal security agencies.[73]

One of the most common misnomers in Syria is that Alawites rule the country. Consisting of only 10 to 13 percent of the population, it is numerically impossible for them to hold every governmental position.[74]   As a result, al-Assad took a layered approach to appointing ministers and generals. He placed members of his immediate family in the most coup-critical positions such as the military units in charge of protecting the capital and the presidential palace. Next, he appointed members from his larger Alawite clan in positions of influence while also promoting other minorities such as Druze, Christians, and Kurds. In doing so, al-Assad was able to market his regime as the protector of minorities. Lastly, he hand-selected for key positions influential Sunnis whose loyalty to his regime was unquestionable and encouraged every family in the inner circle to intermarry. Al-Assad's intent was clear: the future of the new ruling class was

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[71] Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 34.

[72] James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 2, vol. 24 (Fall, 1999): 133.

[73] Ibid., and Gelvin, "Coup Proof," 35.

[74] Jasser, "Sectarian Conflict in Syria," 61.

directly linked to his regime; if he fell, they fell. His efforts produced a highly cohesive ruling elite that remains intact to this day.

While simultaneously leveraging familial, tribal, and religious divisions to create a choke-hold on positions of political and military power, al-Assad recognized the need to create a privileged business class whose success would be reliant on the regime. He acknowledged that early Baath officials had made a mistake with their radical reforms by alienating the traditional Sunni merchant class. As a result, al-Assad sought to create an equally cohesive business community that would be totally dependent upon the regime for privileged access to lucrative government contracts and political protection. In essence, al-Assad created a patronage network. Just as with the elite ruling class, he encouraged the business class families to intermarry with the government elites. The product of his efforts led to what Elizabeth Picard coined in the late-1970s as the Syrian "military–mercantile complex."[75] Despite granting favor to select families, al-Assad never forgot that the basis of the Baath mass mobilization was the peasants, which constituted the majority of Syrians. While establishing a business class, he remained committed to the rural farmers and never failed to provide them government support and subsidies.

The final pillar of al-Assad's coup-proofing revamped Syria's military and security apparatuses. Before 1970, the military initiated most of Syria's coups.[76] As a result, al-Assad created a hand-selected military alongside his regular ground forces. For example, he established the Defense Companies, which were elite paramilitary forces tasked to defend the regime led by his brother. He also professionalized a Republican Guard force consisting of a 25,000 man mechanized division tasked with protecting the capital. Both of these units were predominately manned by loyal Alawites from al-Assad's clan and their familial allies. The above units have merged and evolved, but the remnants still serve as the most loyal soldiers and perpetrated the most vicious

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[75] Yahya Sadowski, "The Evolution of Political Identity in Syria," in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, edited by Shibley Telhami and Michael N. Barnett (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 141.

[76] Gelvin, "Syria: Coup Proof?," 34.

suppression campaigns of the Syrian uprising. In total, the most loyal military units make up roughly one-third of the Syrian military.[77] They are the best trained and equipped.

In addition to the military, al-Assad created an elaborate internal security apparatus. The generic term for an intelligence service in Arabic is *mukhabarat*, and in many ways, al-Assad turned Syria into a mukhabarat state that brutally crushed political dissent. According to David Lesch, there are a total of 15 internal security branches in Syria with an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 full-time security officers with roughly hundreds of thousands of part time workers, which equates to one security officer for every 240 Syrian citizens.[78] In total, all the security services account for $3 billion per year of Syria's defense budget, which constitutes one-third of the overall budget al.-Assad used the security services in the same way his son Bashar uses them today—as instruments for state control. To fully quash political dissent, al-Assad issued overlapping responsibilities and granted the services autonomy to pre-emptively act when deemed necessary.

Overall, al-Assad's attempts to stabilize Syria were incredibly successful. As Lesch describes, he skillfully overcame Syria's sectarian and political issues "through coercion, a pervasive spying apparatus, carefully constructed tribal and family alliances, bribery, and … divide-and-rule tactics."[79] He resurrected his own version of Syria's merchant class that the early Baathists toppled in 1963 while maintaining a strong link to the rural peasants. Given Syria's combustible political history, most were happy to have stability despite the authoritarian nature of the regime; however, this Faustian deal had limits, which were evident in the Syrian uprising.

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[77] Holliday, *the Assad Regime*, 7.

[78] David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 65.

[79] David W. Lesch, "The Uprising That Wasn't Supposed to Happen: Syria and the Arab Spring," in *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, edited by Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 84.

D.   BASHAR AL-ASSAD AND THE SYRIAN UPRISING

When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited his father's regime. Prior to his death, Hafez gave Bashar a crash course in the fundamentals of Syrian governance after his oldest son and heir apparent, Bassel, died in a car accident in 1994.[80] When Bashar took office, he evoked great promise from the Syrian people in his inaugural address. He expressed a desire for economic reform and spoke of the need to incorporate modern thinking into the state bureaucracy; however, change would prove more difficult than Bashar imagined.[81] The basis of his father's system was control and survivability; it was not a system that readily conformed. Bashar experienced the difficulties firsthand as he enacted aggressive reforms with disastrous consequences, but given the suffocating power structure in Syria, he and most experts around the world were stunned when the uprisings spread to Syria.

During an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* at the end of January 2011, Bashar explained why the Arab Spring would not affect his country: "Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence…you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances."[82] Al-Assad also offered an ironic warning to other Arab leaders in the region: "If you didn't see the need of reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it's too late to do any reform."[83] Al-Assad gave the interview approximately one month before the Arab Spring hit Syria; he clearly thought Syria was immune. Why then did the Syrian Uprising start in 2011?

While a variety of factors made Syria vulnerable to the Arab Spring, socio-economic and demographic reasons are near the top. Using a plan drafted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Bashar introduced a series of aggressive economic reforms in 2005 to shift towards a more liberal economy by redirecting government food

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[80] Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 2.

[81] Ibid., 4–5.

[82] Jay Solomon And Bill Spindle, "Syria Strongman: Time for 'Reform,'" *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704832704576114340735033236.

[83] Ibid.

subsidies and privatizing government assets.[84] His intent was to transition from the state-based economy, introduced by Egypt during the UAR years and promoted by his father's regime, towards a social market economy promoted by the IMF and Western countries. The results were catastrophic.

When Bashar redirected food subsidies, he intended to promote capitalism and to teach rural farmers to rely less on the state through better farming techniques. As a result, he offered selective subsidies on food, fuel, and water. Unbeknownst to Bashar, the timing of the reforms could not have been worse. One of the most severe droughts in modern history hit Syria from 2006 to 2010. According to Brad Plummer, "75 percent of farmers suffered total crop failure."[85] Under Hafez al-Assad's regime, the government would have supported the farmers; however, Bashar unwisely decided to stay the course of his reforms. By doing so, he violated the social contract his father had with the rural peasants who bitterly lost their livelihoods. It is no coincidence that the Syrian uprisings began in rural areas hit hardest by the reforms and the drought.

The second aspect of Bashar's reforms was to privatize government assets. He sought to push the business class his father created from the public to the private sphere. Rather than foster capitalism and healthy competition, this exacerbated the cronyism that had long been established with the favored business class. Corruption and wealth spiraled to new heights in the hands of a select few such as the Makhlouf and Tlass families. Unfortunately, Bashar's reforms were doomed partly due to issues native to Syria and partly to extenuating circumstances such as the global economic meltdown in 2008. The aftermath pushed 30 percent of Syrians below the poverty line as food prices skyrocketed.[86] The people watched select individuals grow rich while the government subsidies they previously relied on were absent.

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[84] Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 107.

[85] Brad Plumer, "Drought Helped Cause Syria's War. Will Climate Change Bring More like It?," *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2013,
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/09/10/drought-helped-caused-syrias-war-will-climate-change-bring-more-like-it/.

[86] Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know,* 108.

In addition to economic woes, scholars such as Gelvin and Lesch have pointed to Syria's demographic issues. Unemployment rates were exceptionally high for the youth under 25, which constitute roughly 60 percent of the population.[87] Additionally, 81 percent of college graduates went on average of four years searching for a job, which further indicates that the struggling economy was unable to keep up with population growth.[88] The economic and demographic troubles laid the foundation for a source of grievances among the majority of Syrians, but they still lacked a catalyst to mobilize— they did not have a collective identity hinged on a greater source of injustice. For instance, Bashar initiated the reforms in 2005. Why did Syrians not protest en masse prior to 2011? The answer lies in the wave of inspiration created by the Arab Spring combined with regime repression.

The Syrian uprising began when the local intelligence service in the rural town of Deraa, Syria, arrested a group of school children who wrote "down with the regime" on a wall near their school.[89] The children were sent to Damascus where they were reportedly interrogated and tortured despite the families pleading for their release.[90] The moral outrage of the incident combined with the revolutionary fervor sweeping through the region was enough for people to take to the streets in protest in mid-March 2011; however, the situation was still localized.

For example, the initial protest attracted a few thousand participants, but overwhelming regime repression escalated the situation when security forces opened fire to disperse the crowd. The protest increased to an estimated 20,000 people on the following day.[91] In the span of a couple of weeks, the protests spread to other rural areas like a contagion. Just as in Deraa, the government responded with overwhelming violence to discourage others, but their tactics backfired: they formed the underpinnings of an

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[87] Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know,* 108; Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 62.

[88] Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know,* 108.

[89] Ibid., 103.

[90] Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 56.

[91] Ibid.

oppositional consciousness among the Sunni masses who were inspired by their Arab brethren who toppled their own authoritarian regimes.

In April, the catalyst for an increase in mobilization occurred when the local intelligence service in Deraa tortured and killed 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib. The incident sparked the rallying cry "We are all Hamza al-Khatib," which was reminiscent of the "We are all Khaled Said" slogan from Egypt.[92] Al-Khatib's death was a game changer for Syrian citizens who previously were not compelled to mobilize en-masse. "Days of Rage" spread across the country, and protests grew exponentially and more out of control as the regime responded with escalating violence.

E. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY EXPLANATION TO THE EMERGENCE OF RADICAL ISLAMIST GROUPS

Throughout the early stages of the Syrian uprising, radical Islamist groups were conspicuously absent. Of the three main groups, Ahrar and JAN began to stand out in early 2012, and IS entered the mix in August 2013. In terms of collective action, all three are considered "late-comers" to the conflict compared to the secular opposition that was involved from the onset. The Syrian civil war itself changed the dynamic of the power structure inside the country—there was now room to mobilize. However, simply blaming the civil war for the initial radical Islamist mobilization is an over-simplification. More nuance is needed to understand the unique set of circumstances in the conflict that not only gave the radical Islamists space to mobilize but also what environmental factors contributed to the likelihood of their successful mobilization. The concept of political opportunity structures from social movement theory provides a useful analytical tool to narrow down specific elements.

1. Political Opportunity Structures: An Overview

According to Sydney Tarrow, political opportunity is defined as "consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that

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[92] Sonia Verma, "How a 13-Year-Old Became a Symbol of Syrian Revolution," *The Globe and Mail*, June 1, 2011, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/how-a-13-year-old-became-a-symbol-of-syrian-revolution/article4260803/.

provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure."[93] Essentially, real or imagined structural changes occur in the external environment that directly correlate to enhanced opportunity, which tips the risk versus gain scale towards collective action. Political opportunity suggests that regardless of how organized or experienced a group is, it cannot mobilize successfully without the opportunity to do so.[94] In the case of the early stages of the Syrian conflict, two specific developments altered the dynamic of the operating environment that significantly increased the potential for radical Islamist groups to mobilize successfully: the fragmented Syrian opposition and the al-Assad regime's counterinsurgency strategy.

a.   The Fragmented Opposition

A common misnomer of the Arab Spring is that citizens clamoring for freedom and liberty spontaneously took the streets to demand change. While that narrative has Hollywood appeal, the reality for Arab Spring countries such as Egypt that successfully toppled their regimes is various activist groups used prior events as opportunities to mobilize where they learned valuable tactics and organizational skills. For example, according to Joel Benin, up to four million Egyptian workers participated in as many as 4,000 strikes between 1998 and 2010, which had the effect of "popularizing a culture of protest."[95] It was also an important source of leadership, manpower, and discipline when Egyptians took to the streets. In Syria's repressive environment, its citizens did not have the same level of experience that the Egyptians had. The biggest challenge facing the Syrian protestors was not the regime itself but the lack of protest experience and organization, which increased the likelihood of fragmentation. As the opposition grew, it became more decentralized, which made it susceptible to the Syrian regime's

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[93] Meyer and Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," 1459.

[94] Doug McAdam et al., "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes," 2.

[95] Joel Benin, *The Rise of Egypt's Workers* (Washington, DC: the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 3, http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/28/rise-of-egypt-s-workers.

provocations towards violence. Once violence erupted, it could not be contained, and the opposition split into numerous factions.

Three general opposition groups emerged. Within Syria, local grassroots movements such as the Local Coordinating Councils (LCCs) formed to organize protests and spread the message of opposition on social media.[96] Defected Syrian soldiers formed the FSA to defend Syrian citizens who were being attacked by the regime, especially in Homs, Syria. Outside of Syria, prominent exiled Syrian leaders formed the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Turkey to elicit international support for the opposition; however, the biggest problem among all the groups was communication and lack of leadership.[97] None were able to work successfully with each other. Furthermore, the outbreak of violence blurred the lines between peaceful movements and those advocating armed struggle. The opposition in Syria is an example of what happens when groups try to organize after mobilization has already occurred: without the foundation of agency and trust, a common collective identity is unlikely to form.

The roughly 1,500 individual Syrian opposition groups took on the appearance of mini-fiefdoms as the chaos unfolded, and their ethnic composition tended to match the demographics of their local areas, which made sectarianism a visible component.[98] According to Holliday, "the failure of the political opposition to present a united and viable alternative to the al-Assad regime has largely precluded meaningful cooperation between armed resistance and political opposition above the local level."[99] Yet, the decentralized nature of the secular opposition also made it difficult for the regime to eradicate them. Al-Assad's forces had to treat each area as separate pockets of resistance, which stretched his forces thin. This enabled the opposition to carve out rural safe havens, and for radical Islamists with access to funding, weapons, and manpower, the

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[96] Asaad Al-Saleh, *Dissecting an Evolving Conflict: The Syrian Uprising and the Future of the Country* (Washington, DC: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding 2013), 5, http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/dissecting_an_evolving_conflict.

[97] Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 114.

[98] Blanchard et al., *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, 3.

[99] Joseph Holliday, *Syria's Armed Opposition* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012), 10, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-armed-opposition.

situation was more than ideal to mobilize unhindered by both the regime and the secular opposition.

b.   Al-Assad's Counter-Insurgency Strategy

At the beginning of the uprising in 2011, the regime responded with its norm for dealing with dissent: security forces acted pre-emptively and killed with impunity. Bashar was clearly caught off guard by how quickly the protests spread and seemed unsure how to respond. It took an entire week before he addressed the country, and his first public statements were surprising to some, but not to any student of Syrian history. He blamed the uprising on foreign agents and terrorists. He stressed that his regime would protect Syria at all costs: "my responsibility remains that I should protect the security of this country and ensure its stability."[100] This response was in stark contrast to his interview with *The Wall Street Journal* roughly one month prior when he said, "the protests in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen are ushering in a 'new era' in the Middle East" and alluded "that Arab rulers would need to do more to accommodate their people's rising political and economic aspirations."[101] The dilemma for Bashar was his immutable regime had no paradigm for change or for capitulating to the demands of the protestors. Thus, he had to quickly mold and manipulate the situation into one more conducive with the regime's existing repertoires. After offering limited political concessions mixed with repression, Bashar abandoned any notion of compromise and reverted to what Thomas Friedman referred to as the "Hama Rules" strategy.[102]

Prior to the conflict, the regime dealt with only one major rebellion: the 1982 Islamist uprising in Hama. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, radical offshoots of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood consistently harassed the regime with hit and run style guerrilla tactics and assassinations. Convinced they would be able to garner popular support, the Islamist decided to stand their ground in Hama in 1982. The regime

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[100] Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 76.

[101] Solomon and Spindle, "Syria Strongman: Time for 'Reform.'"

[102] *Syria's Mutating Conflict* (Washington, DC: International Crisis Group, 2012), I, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria-lebanon/syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict.aspx; Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1990), 104.

responded by sending its Defense Companies led by Hafez al-Assad's brother. They encircled Hama and literally flattened the areas where the Islamists fortified themselves. Every building was destroyed, and an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 people were killed.[103] Holliday succinctly captured the "Hama Rules" strategy into three steps: deploy the most loyal Alawite led units, assemble a pro-regime militia to supplement the ground forces, and clear and hold opposition areas.[104]

Once the uprising began, Bashar unleashed the Alawite dominated units, specifically the 4th Armored Division, the Republican Guard, and the Special Forces regiments. They began to systematically attack the Sunni-led opposition, but this was different than Hama in 1982. Since his Alawite units only constitute one-third of all forces, he did not have enough soldiers to attack, clear, and hold territory concurrently. Fearing that his Sunni soldiers in the regular units would defect, as many did early in the conflict, the regime kept most in their garrisons and supplemented its combat forces with Alawite militias known as the *shabiha*.

The shabiha are led by Bashar's extended family, and its members are notoriously associated with Alawite criminal smuggling syndicates.[105] The regime began using the shabiha as shock troops to clear out Sunni villages in the countryside and to force ethnically mixed areas to homogenize through sectarian cleansing. The result was some of the worst atrocities of the civil war and caused a massive upheaval to Syria's sectarian disposition.

The Hama Rules strategy provides some insight to why Bashar labeled the protestors a terrorist movement from the beginning: it fit within the regime's existing playbook. As a result, the regime's entire response was contingent upon validating the terrorist conspiracy narrative. To achieve this, numerous scholars have detailed the regime's efforts. Jenkins stressed that the regime began "intensive propaganda programs portraying the regime's opponents as terrorists," and O'Bagy emphasized that the regime began releasing known radical Islamists from prisons knowing they would join the

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[103] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 77 and 128.

[104] Holliday, *The Assad Regime*, 10

[105] Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War,* 6.

opposition.[106]   Meanwhile, the moderate opposition bore the brunt of all the regime's attacks, which weakened its ability to unite. The regime's claims that radical Islamists were the impetus behind the opposition eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

F.   CONCLUSION

This chapter provided the historical foundation for the remainder of the thesis and linked the origins of Syria's traditional sectarian, political, and economic grievances to the current conflict. This shows that the Syrian civil war is not just a sectarian fight as it is often portrayed in the media; other factors such as rural-urban and socio-economic are just as important. Furthermore, the chapter illustrated how and why the Syrian regime is so resilient and provided some insight on where Bashar diverged from his father. Understanding the structural changes that made Syria susceptible to the Arab Spring uprisings and those that enabled the radical Islamist emergence is vital to differentiating why the current situation is different from other times in Syria's history and provides insight to the relationship between the radical Islamists and their environment.

From the perspective of the radical Islamist groups, they could not have scripted a better situation to exploit. Syria's historical grievances offer an endless supply of fodder for propaganda. The radical Islamist groups also benefited tremendously by entering the conflict after it began. For all intents and purposes, the fragmented opposition functioned as early-risers in the conflict by upsetting the balance of power.[107]   This allowed the radical Islamists to mobilize openly and unconstrained for the first time in Syrian history. Additionally, while the basis of the regime's counterinsurgency strategy was to fight terrorists, it pulverized the secular and moderate elements while intentionally leaving the radical Islamists relatively unmolested. While these dynamics shed light on factors that promoted the emergence of the radical Islamists, they do not explain why and how the radical Islamists thrived. The remaining chapters are dedicated to addressing the proliferation and success of radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict.

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[106] Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War*, 12; O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 15.

[107] Reinoud Leenders, "Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar'a: An Anatomy of the Onset of Syria's Popular Uprising," *Mobilization: An International Journal* 17, no. 4 (December 2012): 419.

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III. IDEOLOGY

By all accounts, radical Islamist groups have grown substantially since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. From an ideological perspective, some have questioned the role of radical Sunni Islam as not only a cultural mobilizing factor but also whether the Syrian people are simply more attracted to it. A simple look at the religious demographics in Syria shows that Sunnis comprise roughly 75 percent of the population.[108]   However, it would be a reductionist and essentialist argument to arbitrarily link the rise of radical Islamist groups with the substantial Sunni population in Syria with no additional evidence. The presence of a Sunni majority is not a valid indicator alone that radical Islamism would flourish in the current conflict. Yet, there are no shortage of scholars and politicians that cite Islam in general as the root cause of the rise in Islamist groups as a whole around the world. This notion fits with Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Theory, Lewis' assertions in "The Roots of Muslims Rage," and Juergensmeyer's Cosmic War explanation.[109]   Additionally, Hoffman and Jamal demonstrated that religion was an important rallying call during the Arab Spring uprisings, and Byman stated that religion is a vital component for legitimacy to insurgencies containing Islamist groups.[110]   Simply blaming Islam runs the risk of condoning "Islamaphobia" and grossly oversimplifying the Syrian conflict. Additionally, Islamist movements are highly diverse, and specificity is needed when singling out a particular strand.

Within this setting, how then did the radical Islamist ideology in Syria proliferate and thrive in a conflict that began as a secular and nationalist struggle? How did radical versions of Islam prevail over moderate interpretations? After exploring the foundation of the radical Islamist ideology, I will use elements of radicalization theory and cultural framing from social movement theory as an analytical framework to examine the

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[108] Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 102.

[109] Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?;" Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage;" Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.

[110] Hoffman and Jamal, "How Islam Mattered in the Arab Uprisings;" Byman, "Fighting Salafi-Jihadist Insurgencies: How Much Does Religion Really Matter?"

ideological appeal of radical Islamist groups in the context of the Syrian civil war. I assert that a combination of the Salafi-jihadi ideology with a Sunni population polarized by indiscriminate regime repression presented a fertile environment for the framing strategies employed by Ahrar, JAN, and IS. This chapter is organized into two main sections. First, it will discuss the Salafi ideology, describe why the al-Assad regime is the "perfect enemy" for jihadists, and show how regime repression fostered an attraction to jihadist messaging. Second, this chapter will use framing theory to analyze the information operations (IO) strategies of Ahrar, JAN, and IS.

A.   SALAFISM AND THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY

David Snow and Scott Byrd define ideology as "a cover term for the values, beliefs, and goals associated with a movement or a broader, encompassing social entity, and is assumed to provide the rationale for individual and collective action."[111]   In the context of the Syrian civil war, Aron Lund highlighted that "Islam functions both as a ready-to-use ideological prism, a sectarian identity marker, and an effective mobilization tool in Sunni Muslim areas."[112]   However, Sunni Islam is far from being monolithic: there are numerous ways to interpret its teachings. For Syria's prominent radical Islamist groups, the foundation of their version of Islam lies in Salafism.

Salafism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam that seeks to purge traditions and tribal customs from Sunnism that developed over the centuries.[113]   The concept of *tawhid* (the unity of God) forms the basis of the Salafi creed, and to protect tawhid, Salafists believe in strict adherence to the Quran and seek to emulate the Prophet Muhammad and his earliest followers in every way.[114]   Based on their literal interpretations of Islam, Salafists also believe in the necessity of establishing an Islamic state ruled by *sharia*

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[111] David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, "Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly Review* 12, no. 2 (June 2007): 120.

[112] Aron Lund, *Syrian Jihadism* (Stockholm, Sweden: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2012), 11, www.ui.se/upl/files/77409.pdf.

[113] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents,* 5.

[114] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006): 207.

(Islamic law).[115]   Global Salafi networks receive substantial spiritual and material support from Saudi Arabia, which represents the epicenter of the Salafi ideology.

While Salafists agree on the necessity of tawhid, they vary significantly on the acceptable form of activism to achieve their goals and the subjective nature of how to apply Islam to modern issues. According to Wiktorowicz, Salafists are divided into three factions: purists who are non-violent fundamentalists who seek change through *dawa* (proselytizing), politicos who work within the existing political system to establish an Islamic state through reform, and jihadists who espouse violence (or *jihad*) as the only solution to achieve an Islamic state.[116]   Thus, the main source of intra-Salafi contention tends to be strategy, and the ultra-violent Salafi-jihadi movements such al-Qaeda (AQ), IS, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al-Shabaab in Somalia among others are minority fringe subsets of Salafism.[117]   Statistically speaking, the majority of Salafists try to reconcile their beliefs through non-violent means. Within this construct, Salafi groups in Syria fall somewhere on a sliding scale of contextual interpretation and ideological sophistication.

Disaggregating Salafi groups in the context of an ongoing civil war such as Syria's can be particularly challenging because the fault lines between political reform and armed opposition become blurred.[118]   Regardless, the vast majority of literature on Salafi groups fighting in Syria identifies Ahrar, JAN, and IS as being the most prominent, and each group professes jihad as being central to their efforts to topple the regime. For this reason, the groups are placed in the Salafi-jihadi camp for purposes of this thesis.

Of the three groups, IS sits firmly in the most extreme end of the spectrum. It takes a binary position by violently opposing everyone who does not adhere to its

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[115] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 116.

[116] Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 208; The word jihad is somewhat of a controversial term that has many meanings depending on the context. In Arabic, it literally means "to struggle;" however, when radical Islamists use the term, they most often use it to mean "holy war." Thus, when some use the term, they may refer to jihad as an internal spiritual struggle to live in the path of God. When radical Islamists use it, they most often refer to jihad as an armed struggle against non-Muslims. For purposes of this thesis, the use of the term jihad will have a military connotation, and the term jihadis or jihadists are those who wage violent jihad.

[117] Ibid.

[118] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 18.

worldview, including other jihadist groups. JAN is technically extreme but not as extreme as IS. As the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, it adheres to al-Qaeda's vision of establishing an Islamic caliphate but employs a pragmatic approach to garner popular support, rather than IS's doctrinally pure approach.[119] Ahrar is the least extreme of the three groups and seeks to be the moderate option. Just as Islam is not monolithic, neither are these jihadist groups.

While ideology can rationalize and legitimize violence, many scholars are loath to accept it as a stand-alone explanation for radicalizing individuals towards collective action. According to Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, the jihadist threat "cannot be reduced to the prevalence of … a radical form of Islam."[120] Thus, more is needed to explain the resonance of the Salafi-jihadi ideology in the context of the Syrian civil war. Two factors are vital for explaining why the Syrian conflict is an ideal breeding ground for jihadists: the al-Assad regime represents the perfect jihadist enemy, and indiscriminate regime repression has validated the jihadist narrative.

B.   THE AL-ASSAD REGIME: THE PERFECT JIHADI ENEMY

Prior to the Syrian uprising, Nibras Kazimi referred to the al-Assad regime as the "perfect enemy" for jihadists because according to their worldview, the regime represents a "tyrannical, secular, and heretical" trifecta.[121] Beginning with the "tyrannical" description that few could disagree with, the al-Assad regime began when Hafez al-Assad led his bloodless in coup in 1970 and coup-proofed the regime to solidify his rule. As Chapter II explained, a consequence of Hafez's efforts was that his regime ruthlessly crushed any opposition including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its radical offshoot the Fighting Vanguard in 1982 during the Islamist uprising. After the regime's most loyal Alawite dominated units crushed the Islamist opposition in Hama, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was banned, and its members sought refuge in neighboring states, especially

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[119] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 7.

[120] Clark R. McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 221.

[121] Nibras Kazimi, *Syria through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2010), 80.

the Gulf countries. Surviving members of the Fighting Vanguard also fled Syria and traveled to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviets. While the Islamists were decimated, the civilian population was as well with an estimated 10,000 to 40,000 civilian deaths at the hands of the regime.[122] The atrocities at Hama have been permanently seared into the memory of many in the Sunni population. While the regime is known for authoritarianism and repression, it is the memory of Hama that jihadists often cite today as an example of the tyrannical regime.

The secular doctrine of the regime's Baath Party is the second aspect that makes the regime the perfect enemy of jihadists. By definition, the Baath Party represents a combination of secularism, Arab nationalism, and socialism among other ideologies. The historical reasoning behind Baathism was to unite Syria's diverse population. As a rule, all Salafis adhere to the principle of tawhid, and most jihadists adhere to Sayyid Qutb's concept of *hakimiyyat Allah* (absolute sovereignty of God), which rejects man's sovereignty over other men.[123] When combined, Baathism stands in stark contrast to the religious and political views of jihadists on multiple levels.

The third aspect, which is perhaps the most powerful mobilizing tool during times of sectarian strife, is the presence of Alawites in key leadership positions in the Syrian regime. Alawites are considered an offshoot of Shia Islam; however, the Alawite religious faith also reputedly contains elements of Phoenician paganism and Christian trinitarianism, which adds a level of mystery surrounding their beliefs.[124] In a region rife with Sunni–Shia tension, the Alawites are an easy target for jihadist vitriol for being associated not only with Shia Islam but also representing polytheistic tendencies, an unforgivable sin in the eyes of jihadists. Thus, jihadists label Alawites as a heretical sect.

The jurisprudential basis of jihadi opposition traces back to a 13th century *fatwa* (religious opinion) by one of the central figures and ideologues for Salafis, Taqi ad-Din

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[122] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 77 and 128.

[123] Roxanne Leslie Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 131; Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," 208.

[124] Nisan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression*, 115.

Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah. According to his fatwa, Ibn Taymiyyah ruled that "Alawites are more heretical than the Jews and Christians, even more so than the polytheists. Their damage to the Muslim community… is greater than the damage of the infidels who fight against Muslims such as the heretic Mongols, the Crusaders, and others."[125] He eternally condemned them as apostates and religiously justified killing them. Ibn Taymiyyah handed the jihadists of today a timeless blueprint and blank check to attack the Alawites without the burdensome necessity of religious justification.[126]

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, the al-Assad regime is also a staunch ally of Iran and Hizbullah, which are mortal enemies of Sunni jihadists. Thus, the regime represents everything jihadists despise and is the perfect enemy for them to vilify in their ideology. However, the presence of the regime is still not enough to explain why the Salafi-jihadi ideology resonates and thrives in the current civil war.

C.   SYRIAN SUNNI MORAL OUTRAGE

Many prominent scholars on radicalization such as Wiktorowicz and Sageman provide insight into the process of how a person can become radicalized and join a jihadist group. Wiktorowicz promotes a linear model of radicalization that begins with the presence of a "cognitive opening," which can be a crisis or experience dealing with discrimination, victimization, or humiliation that causes a person to be receptive to radical ideas.[127] Sageman agrees with the cognitive opening assertion but stresses that any cognitive event must be a "major moral violation" that elicits outrage.[128] In addition to cognitive openings, the presence of other environmental factors such as common threats, deep feelings of hatred, and deliberate actions taken by jihadist groups to recruit the disenchanted increase the likelihood of radicalization.

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[125] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 21; Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 65.

[126] Kazimi, *Syria through Jihadist Eyes*, 10.

[127] King and Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists," 605.

[128] Marc Sageman, ''A Strategy for Fighting International Islamist Terrorists,'' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 618, no. 1 (2008): 225.

According to McCauley and Moskalenko, "groups in conflict, especially if the conflict involves prolonged violence, become more extreme in their negative perceptions of one another."[129] When one group is threatened or attacked repeatedly by another, it magnifies the awareness of "us" and "them," and powerful emotions of hatred begin to serve as "an extreme form of negative identification" to facilitate mass radicalization.[130] In the case of the Syrian uprising, there are numerous examples of regime brutality that constituted major moral violations on the Sunni rural population. The regime's abuse of children, brutal sieges, and indiscriminate bombings greatly facilitated rural Sunnis to view the regime as illegitimate and coalesce under a sectarian identity.

Few atrocities spark more moral outrage than those against children, and the Syrian regime set this unfortunate precedent from the onset. The Arab Spring protests in Syria began when schoolchildren in Deraa wrote "down with the regime" on a wall near their school. The regime responded by sending them to Damascus where they were reportedly interrogated and tortured despite the families pleading for their release.[131] Notwithstanding the country's long-standing socio-economic and political grievances and the regime's reputation for repression, the torturing of children is what motivated the initial protestors to take to the streets.

The death of Hamza al-Khatib serves as another example. In May 2011, people all over the world reviled in horror when al Jazeera released clips from a video showing the mutilated body of 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib. Security forces in Deraa arrested him in April 2011 during a protest he attended with his father. After repeated inquiries from his family, security forces returned Hamza's lifeless body in May. Sonia Verma described the damage: "His jaw and both kneecaps had been smashed. His flesh was covered with cigarette burns. His penis had been cut off. Other injuries appeared to be consistent with the use of electroshock devices and being whipped with a cable."[132] It is difficult to quantify morale outrage, but despite all of the regime's harsh tactics during the early

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[129] McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 164.

[130] Ibid., 161–71.

[131] Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 56.

[132] Verma, "How a 13-Year-Old Became a Symbol of Syrian Revolution."

phases of the uprising, none aside from the death of Hamza al-Khatib sparked "Days of Rage" across the country.

The more the protests spread in rural Sunni areas, the more the regime's responses began to take the form of collective punishment. The siege of the Baba Amr neighborhood in Homs and the use of barrel bombs in Aleppo exemplify the regime's tactics. Once the uprising began in Deraa, it spread to other cities such as Homs. The neighborhood of Baba Amr was considered an opposition stronghold throughout 2011, and its inhabitants were exclusively Sunni. In February 2012, regime forces surrounded the neighborhood with an Alawite dominated force and pummeled the neighborhood with artillery fire.[133] By March, regime forces defeated the opposition, but the siege of Baba Amr was executed in a manner reminiscent of the Hama massacre in 1982, which brought the jihadi narrative closer to the grievances experienced by locals in Homs.

In addition to Baba Amr-style sieges, the regime introduced a new tactic: barrel bombs. These munitions can be thought of as "flying improvised explosive devices."[134] They are large pipes or barrels stuffed with explosives and shrapnel that are dropped out of helicopters in opposition held areas where large civilian populations reside. The regime first introduced barrel bombs in Aleppo in 2012 and began using them in Homs shortly thereafter.[135] For local Sunnis, the effect of the barrel bombs was terrifying due to their indiscriminate nature, which again contributed to intense feelings of sectarian hatred towards the regime.

There are plenty of other examples that sparked moral outrage such as the massacres conducted by the shabiha in the Sunni villages of Houla and Qubayr located near Homs and Hama respectively where the shabiha executed roughly 186 people

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[133] Holliday, *Syria's Armed Opposition*, 13.

[134] *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Barrel Bomb," last modified January 25, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barrel_bomb. *Wikipedia* should be in italics. It is considered a dictionary or encyclopedia.

[135] Damien McElroy, "Syrian Regime Deploys Deadly New Weapons on Rebels," *The Telegraph*, August 31, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9512719/Syrian-regime-deploys-deadly-new-weapons-on-rebels.html.

including women and children.[136] All of the above events illustrate that the regime's tactics reinforced sectarian cleavages. While the opposition initially emphasized secular values, religious narratives like the Salafi-jihadi narrative began to make the most sense. Syrian Salafis are staunchly anti-regime and anti-Alawite. They represent the polar opposite of everything the regime stands for. As Aron Lund explained, "Sunni fighters are drawn to Salafism not by the fine points of the doctrine, but because it helps them manifest a Sunni identity in the most radical way possible, while also providing them with a theological explanation for the war against Shia Muslims [Alawites], a sense of belonging, and spiritual security."[137]

While this section helps to explain why the Syrian civil war has been a fertile environment for the Salafi-jihadi ideology to thrive, it does not explain how jihadist groups have maximized the situation. Framing theory offers insight into how radical groups have enhanced their ideology and a framework to analyze the information operations strategies of jihadist groups.

D.   FRAMING THEORY: AN OVERVIEW

Douglas Snow defines framing as "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action."[138] Dalgaard-Nielsen adds that framing is a way for groups to translate grievances into action by promoting "a specific version of reality and to make this version resonate with the worldview of potential recruits."[139] In order for frames to be effective, they must resonate with the target audience by tapping into master narratives. Generally, framing strategies contain three core types: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. By using carefully crafted frames that diagnose specific problems,

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[136] Stephanie Nebehay, "Most Houla Victims Killed in Summary Executions: U.N.," *Reuters*, May 29, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/29/us-syria-un-idUSBRE84S10020120529; Jim Muir, "UN Monitors 'Shot at' in Syria," *BBC News*, June 7, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18352281.

[137] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 10.

[138] McAdam et al., "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes - Toward a Synthetic, Comparative Perspective on Social Movements," 6.

[139] Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe," 802.

proffer solutions, and motivate collective action, opposition groups make themselves more appealing to potential recruits, legitimize their actions, and foster an insurgent consciousness.

In Syria, framing offers the missing link for what has facilitated aggrieved Sunni populations to cognitively align with the jihadists. Ahrar, JAN, and IS represent varying degrees of extreme beliefs, which is reflected in their frames. While it would seem that this could lead to ideological confusion, the opposite has occurred. The variance in Salafi-jihadi application expands the options for people to choose from within an ideology that most strongly opposes the regime. The result is that each group offers a jihadi-like buffet to choose from depending on a person's circumstances or outlook. The next few sections will dissect themes from the framing and media strategies of each group.

1. Ahrar al Sham: the Median Voter Option

When Ahrar al Sham formed in late 2011, its leaders pursued two strategies: unite Salafist groups fighting in Syria and portray itself as the moderate Salafi-jihadi option. For example, Ahrar is a leading faction in the Islamic Front (IF), which is the largest bloc of Islamist groups. According to Lund, the IF consists of seven Islamist groups whose numbers range between 45,000 and 70,000, which is most likely exaggerated on the higher end for propaganda purposes.[140] Ahrar's estimated strength alone is between 10,000 and 20,000, according to *The Economist*.[141] Aside from the IF, Ahrar also regularly conducts operations with other groups, including JAN and the Free Syrian Army, but is embroiled in an intra-jihadi feud with IS, which has reportedly killed two of Ahrar's prominent leaders (Hassan Abboud and Abu Khalid al-Suri). In the wake of IS's extremism, Ahrar has maintained its commitment to bridging the moderate-radical gap. It can be thought of as the "median voter" option. According to Shadi Hamid, in order to expand popularity, some Islamist groups (whether radical or not) "deemphasize ideology

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[140] Aron Lund, *The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183.

[141] "Competition among Islamists," *The Economist*.

and move to the center where presumably the median voters" (or large segments of society) are located, which adequately describes Ahrar's framing strategies.[142]

Beginning with diagnostic frames, which "elevate individual grievances into a systemic failure and identify whom to blame," Ahrar has relied primarily on "targeted vilification" aimed at the Syrian regime and IS.[143]   A common tactic among radical Islamists is to refer to their enemies as infidels.[144] In the Syrian milieu, there are ample historical examples of Alawites being indiscriminately framed as infidels. This label tends to resonate mostly with rural Sunnis who were hit hardest by the regime's policies prior to the Arab Spring and have suffered tremendously at the hands of the regime during the civil war such as in Deraa and Homs. Rather than label all Alawites as infidels, Ahrar has taken a more nuanced approach by referring to the regime as "the criminal Nusayris," which is a historical, derogatory term for Alawites used in fatwas by Ibn Taymiyyah.[145]   The term is disparaging because it refers to the founder of the Alawite faith who was associated with the eleventh Shiite Imam, whereas the term Alawite stems from the fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Abu Talib whose death was one of the primary reasons for the Sunni–Shia split. Using Nusayri instead of Alawite is meant to imply that Alawites are a heretical offshoot of Shiism and not true Muslims.[146] Like Ahrar, JAN and IS also use the Nusayri label, but Ahrar tries to distinguish between the Nusayri regime and the Alawite minority population, which is meant to demonstrate concern for minorities while still vilifying the regime. Additionally, Ahrar typically refers to the regime as the criminal Nusayris, which places the emphasis on corruption and illegitimacy rather than a sectarian call against all Alawites.

[142] Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in a New Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30.

[143] Doowan Lee, "A Social Movement Approach to Unconventional Warfare," *Special Warfare* 26, no. 3 (2013): 30.

[144] Halverson, Corman, and Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 109.

[145] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 21 and 26.

[146] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition* (Washington, DC: International Crisis Group, 2012), 11, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2012/mena/syria-tentative-jihad-syria-s-fundamentalist-opposition.aspx.

In regard to IS, Ahrar publicly calls them Kharijites, which refers to an extreme Islamic sect from the seventh century that radically used *takfir* (the process of one Muslim declaring another Muslim an apostate). Kharijites are widely despised in Islamic history, and the label is a derogatory term meant to invoke revulsion in Muslim communities. For example, when a suicide bomber assessed to be from IS killed Abu Khalid al-Suri in 2014, Hassan Abboud, who was later reportedly killed by IS, stated, "It seems he was killed in a suicide attack…at the hands of the Kharijites of this age."[147] By referring to IS as Kharijites, Ahrar vilifies it while portraying itself as less extreme.

Diagnostically placing blame is part of an effective strategy; using prognostic frames to offer a solution to rectify the problem is an equally important component. Most Islamist groups wield the jihad master narrative as the proposed solution, which is meant as a call to arms to defend Islam.[148] IS is indiscriminate in its application of violent jihad; Ahrar, in contrast, takes a more nuanced approach. Rather than indiscriminately and independently applying the label of jihad to the Syrian conflict, Ahrar has worked with leading Salafi scholars to promote jihad as a unified Muslim community. For example, Hassan Abboud was the only representative of any Islamist group in Syria that attended a conference in Cairo in June 2013 with numerous prominent Salafi scholars where all present called for the Syrian conflict to be labeled as a jihad.[149] The presence of respected scholars demonstrated Ahrar's attempt at solidarity.

Despite declaring Syria a jihad, the word "jihad" is conspicuously absent from the IF's and Ahrar's charter, which appears to be intentional. According to one Ahrar spokesman, the group does not want "Western opinion makers to base their information on [Islamic] stereotypes."[150] While Ahrar wants to separate its interpretation of jihad from IS, it must retain its Islamic character. As a result, Ahrar still calls for a jihad in

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[147] Aron Lund, *Who and What Was Abu Khalid Al-Suri? Part I* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54618.

[148] Halverson, Corman, and Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, 13.

[149] Aaron Zelin and Charles Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front," *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2013, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/24/the-crowning-of-the-syrian-islamic-front/.

[150] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 20.

Syria and refers to its fighters as jihadis or *mujahidin* (holy warriors) in the media but tries to limit the application of it to distinguish itself from IS.

The last type of frame employed by Ahrar is motivational, which is meant to inspire individuals to action. Through frame alignment, Ahrar links its goal of an Islamic state ruled by sharia with existing secular narratives that call for the overthrow of the al-Assad regime and a return to Syria's former greatness. Secular leaders in the Syrian National Council (SNC) such as Burhan Ghalioun often use similar frames as a rallying call, but their frames lack specificity of what a new Syria would look like after the fall of the regime. Within this political void, Ahrar has pushed its vision of building "a civilized Islamic society in Syria, ruled by the law of God" where minority rights will be respected and "all Syrians will be equally blessed with the justice of Islam."[151] While Ahrar's vision of a state sounds rather utopian, its description lacks the harshness and barbarism exhibited by IS. Furthermore, Ahrar's use of this frame emphasizes the regime, not sectarian tensions. Overall, Thomas Pierret best surmised the differences between Ahrar's media and framing strategy compared to IS: "The political identity Ahrar al-Sham displays is nationalist Salafi—they claim they are Salafi, but they use Syrian national symbols…that's a very different brand from the global jihadi one."[152]

2. Jabhat al Nusra: the Hybrid Option

Like Ahrar, JAN formed in late 2011. Its leaders and core group of fighters were veterans of the Iraq War and were sent to Syria by the IS leadership.[153] From its inception, JAN established itself as an effective, professional, and disciplined fighting force, and it grew in reputation and size in 2012. According to Brian Jenkins from

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[151] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 22.

[152] Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "Syrian Rebels Driven by Religion, but on Their Own Terms," *Washington Post*, August 9, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-rebels-driven-by-religion-but-on-their-own-terms/2012/08/09/a8c82468-e241-11e1-ae7f-d2a13e249eb2_story.html.

[153] Noman Benotman and Blake Roisin, *Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing* (London, England: Quilliam Foundation, 2012), http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wpcontent/uploads/publications/free/jabhatalnusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf.

RAND, JAN's estimated strength is 5,000 to 6,000.[154] In 2013, JAN had a public spat with IS when its leaders refused a merger, and in the aftermath of the jihadi drama, JAN swore allegiance to al-Qaeda. Overall, JAN is not entirely exclusive—it will work with other groups on a case-by-case basis. JAN has been resistant to jihadi on jihadi violence even when provoked by IS. On the jihadi extremist scale, JAN is on the same end as IS, but its leaders have deliberately chosen a pragmatic strategy to avoid alienating other groups and to foster popular support. For this reason, JAN can be thought of as the hybrid option and arguably the most dangerous, because they agree with IS but deceptively appear more like Ahrar at times. JAN's framing strategies confirm this assertion.

JAN appears to be using a framing strategy advocated by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that consists of proffering a "grievance narrative that is consistent with the core tenets of al-Qaeda's ideology but infused with themes that resonate locally, increasing its salience, credibility, and audience acceptance."[155] JAN's framing looks like Ahrar's: its diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames are similar. JAN vilifies the regime and refers to Alawites in the regime as Nusayris while avoiding a damnation of all Alawites as a whole. JAN also calls for violent jihad and attempts to align its ideas of establishing a caliphate as being compatible with a return to greatness for Greater Syria. As expected, the differences between JAN and Ahrar lie in the nuances and strategic context.

As an al-Qaeda affiliate, JAN is unique because it not only avoids alienating the local population but also actively tries to garner popular support. Its inspiration for this strategy is twofold. First, JAN's core leadership fought with AQI in 2006 and witnessed the group's loss of popular support during the al-Anbar Awakening.[156] JAN's leadership felt the scenario could have been avoided if AQI had been flexible with some of their principles for the purpose of establishing deeper ties with the local communities. Second, JAN is heavily influenced by the teachings of the jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri who

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[154] Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War*, 9.

[155] Alistair Harris, *Exploiting Grievances: al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 6, http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/06/08/exploiting-grievances-al-qaeda-in-arabian-peninsula.

[156] Benotman and Roisin, *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

stresses the importance of winning the hearts and minds while waging jihad by "providing services to the people, avoiding being seen as extremists, maintaining strong relationships with the communities and other fighting groups, and putting the focus on fighting the regime."[157] Al-Suri's teachings place military pragmatism above ideological purity while waging jihad; however, al-Suri and JAN are masking their true intent with pragmatism. JAN's leaders are not opposed to IS' harsh treatment of the population; they just think it is counter-productive.

For example, JAN refers to Alawites as infidels as a diagnostic frame like all jihadi groups. However, rather than focusing on the regime, JAN has used it in an indirect manner by offering itself as an alternative to the regime by actively ingratiating itself in areas it controls. For example, JAN established a humanitarian wing that distributes relief items such as food, gas, and clothing.[158] Additionally, JAN's media wing regularly explains that some operations were canceled due to concerns of civilian casualties and focuses the majority of video releases on direct engagements with the regime where collateral damage was minimized.[159] JAN's use of an Alawite infidel frame coupled with community outreach and selective military operations have allowed it to take the focus off of its jihadi roots and present an illusion of working towards removing the regime with the rest of the opposition.

From a prognostic standpoint, JAN like many others promotes violent jihad as the answer; however, it adds a different twist. JAN's use of the violent jihad frame has been to focus on its own outward display of waging jihad to inspire others. In JAN's propaganda videos, it has stuck to examples of its military prowess in attacking the regime as opposed to criticizing others for not waging jihad, which is consistent with al-Suri's recommendations.[160] In essence, JAN's disciplined military tactics romanticize jihad to Muslim youth outside of Syria who are seeking excitement and serves as an

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[157] Hassan Hassan, "A Jihadist Blueprint for Hearts and Minds is Gaining Traction in Syria," *The National*, March 4, 2014, http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/a-jihadist-blueprint-for-hearts-and-minds-is-gaining-traction-in-syria.

[158] Benotman and Roisin, *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

[159] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 37.

[160] Benotman and Roisin, *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

example to others inside Syria. The result is those who choose not to fight are meant to feel guilt and shame, and those who do fight are regaled with heroic jihad stories from the past and present. From this perspective, JAN tries to portray itself as waging an honorable jihad to defend the faithful against infidel aggressors.

Like Ahrar, JAN has tapped into traditional Syrian narratives for motivational purposes to mask its long-term goals. JAN is acutely aware that its jihadist goal of restoring the caliphate is incompatible with many in Syrian society. JAN's leadership made an early decision to soften public rhetoric regarding the establishment of a caliphate once/if the regime falls and the subsequent implementation of sharia.[161] As a result, JAN has taken a nuanced approach in propaganda videos. All public statements are carefully crafted to resonate on some level with the concept of Syria as Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria), which is meant to be a historical reference to the early Islamic caliphates and to the region before Western powers divided it. For example, rather than focus on its desired end state to enforce its version of sharia law as IS has done, JAN stated that it wants to "bring the law of Allah back to his land" in its first video statement in January 2012.[162] While it may seem like semantics, leaving out the word "sharia" was intentional.[163] While that is just one example, JAN has routinely softened any reference to its desired end state; however, JAN has still aggressively propagated its belief that the Syrian civil war is an Islamic issue supported by religious justification. Its media wing regularly distributes CDs centered on "the Quranic notion of jihad and the virtue of the people of greater Syria mentioned in the Sunnah."[164] These messages resonate with jihadists and the disenchanted Sunni public. The CDs invoke a return to historical greatness and lead people to believe that they could be the ones to restore greatness to Greater Syria in the name of God.

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[161] Benotman and Roisin, *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Ibid.

3.   Islamic State: the Manichean Choice

Of all the Syrian opposition groups, IS is the most extreme. Its message has been consistent from the beginning—it takes a binary position and seeks to crush anyone who opposes its worldview; thus, it represents the Manichean choice. From the moment IS fighters entered the Syrian conflict in 2013, they caused significant turmoil trying to strong-arm other groups, even Ahrar and JAN, and attacking them. In July 2013, IS rocked the jihadi world by announcing the formation of a caliphate based in Raqqa, Syria, and seems to be equally concerned with governance as it is with fighting. In this regard, IS is unique because it is doing what no other group has ever done: provide the world a glimpse of what a caliphate actually looks like. On the surface, it would be logical to assume that IS has little appeal due to its alienating tactics, but it is one of the largest opposition groups. According to the CIA, IS's estimated strength is 20,000 to 31,500.[165]

As noted in the above sections, IS draws from the same general diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational narratives as Ahrar and JAN; however, IS's versions are more extreme, immutable, and unapologetic. While JAN and Ahrar go to great lengths to maximize the appeal of their messages, IS takes a different approach by tailoring messages for recruits outside of Syria, relying on intimidation and coercion for those inside Syria, and revolutionizing its distribution of messages.

A recent documentary exemplifies IS's framing strategy targeting those outside of Syria. *Vice News* reporter Medyan Dairieh in August 2014, gained unprecedented access to life in Raqqa, where he spent three weeks embedded in the actual "Islamic State." One particular scene epitomizes IS's complex framing through visual cues loaded with symbolism and gestures. "We've broken Sykes–Picot," shouted an IS fighter while standing on a destroyed berm that previously separated the Syria–Iraq border while he triumphantly raised his index finger in the air.[166] To a casual non-Muslim observer, the scene does not appear overly complex; however, to disenchanted Muslims, the scene is

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[165] Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 10.

[166] "The Islamic State," YouTube video, 37:12, from *Vice News* correspondent Medyan Dairieh inside the Islamic State, posted by *Vice News*, August 14, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUjHb4C7b94.

rife with symbolism that taps into a historical grievance narrative while reaffirming IS' ideology in two ways. First, the Sykes–Picot treaty is one of the primary historical "roots of Arab bitterness."[167] For many, the treaty embodies Western attempts to place Arab lands under colonial rule. In the documentary, IS did not just destroy the berm, it ceremoniously used a bulldozer to level it to "open the route for all Muslims," as one IS fighter explained.[168]

Second, when the IS fighter raised his index finger in the air, the purpose was not just to denote victory; it was meant to communicate a primary tenet of the Salafi ideology: tawhid. While tawhid is not an extreme concept, IS manipulates it to represent its Manichean ideology and the need to rid the world of apostates and infidels. According to Nathaniel Zelinsky, when IS militants display the tawhid symbol, they are reaffirming their uncompromising views against pluralism and non-fundamentalist regimes.[169] The tawhid gesture is rampant in almost every IS video. The effect is that tawhid is IS's signature gesture, and the group has turned a well-known gesture in the Muslim world into a Nazi-like salute that reaffirms its violent ideology through a low cost action. Thus, in one scene of a documentary that was viewed over 14 million times in just four months on YouTube, IS demonstrated its diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames through words, gestures, and symbols.

Christoph Reuter, Raniah Salloum, and Samiha Shafy have remarked on how IS goes to great lengths to target specific audiences: "For Western observers, they are cool, clean, and coherent. For locals, they are bloody, brutal, and fear-inducing."[170] Reuter et al. analyzed a video from September 2014 that IS distributed among the Sunni masses living inside areas of its control. The video showed IS fighters massacring members of a rebellious tribe by brutally beheading them while laughing and joking. The video

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[167] Goldschmidt Jr. and Davidson, "The Roots of Arab Bitterness," 46.

[168] "The Islamic State," YouTube video, 36:40.

[169] Nathaniel Zelinsky, "ISIS Sends a Message," *Foreign Affairs*, September 3, 2014, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141956/nathaniel-zelinsky/isis-sends-a-message.

[170] Christoph Reuter, Raniah Salloum, and Samiha Shafy, "The Professional PR Strategies of ISIS in Syria and Iraq," *Spiegel Online*, August 10, 2014, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-professional-pr-strategies-of-isis-in-syria-and-iraq-a-995611 html.

achieved the intended effect: the tribal Sheikh begged for mercy afterwards.[171] This is but one example of how IS relies on different types of motivation to garner support for those living in its purview: coercion, fear, and intimidation. Its message is clear: anyone who dares defy IS will be slaughtered.

From a distribution standpoint, IS has embraced modern technology and revolutionized the spread of jihadi propaganda on an unparalleled level. Its media officers deftly incorporate most social media websites such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, YouTube, Instagram and SoundCloud among others to spread their messages. Ahrar and JAN also use the sites but not on the level of sophistication as IS.

In a recent analysis of IS, Richard Barrett of the Soufan Group detailed the methods used by IS to distribute media through crowd sourcing.[172] For example, prior to posting the speech by the leader of IS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announcing the formation of the Islamic State in July 2013 on YouTube, IS's media department tweeted still shots from the video to announce its pending release.[173] The tweets were then re-tweeted countless times to maximize visibility before the video was uploaded. The re-tweets prevented any censorship from Twitter because shutting down the account of the original tweet made little difference since the message was already re-tweeted. By the time al-Baghdadi's speech was posted to YouTube, IS could count not only on potential supporters viewing it but also most major news networks, which catapulted its messages to the global level. According to Barrett, "there is no precedent for this…in a counterintuitive move, the Islamic State has maximized control of its message by giving up control of its delivery."[174] It is clear from IS's consolidated media strategy that it is going beyond diagnosing problems, proffering solutions, and motivating collective action like the framing strategies of JAN and Ahrar—IS is marketing its own unique brand to a global audience.

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[171] Reuter et al., "The Professional PR Strategies of ISIS in Syria and Iraq."

[172] Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 51.

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid.

E.   CONCLUSION

There are no statistics available for Syria before or after the war began to quantitatively measure public opinion on radical Islamist ideology. Prior to the war, Syria was not known as a bastion of radical Islamist sentiment, but the evolution of radical Islamist groups from the fringes in 2011 to the largest opposition groups in 2014 indicates that their ideology must resonate at some level. In order to understand why, the Salafi-jihadi ideology must be placed within the context of the Syrian civil war to examine its appeal: the al-Assad regime's brutal tactics formed the underpinnings of an oppositional consciousness in the masses for the jihadists to exploit.

At the group level, disaggregating the framing and media strategies revealed some important conclusions. Ahrar and JAN have successfully aligned their jihadi narratives with local grievances to achieve resonance through framing strategies. Ahrar is clearly trying to show moderation; however, it is still a jihadist group that emerged through violent conflict. Its moderation should not be mistaken for mainstream Islamism. JAN, on the other hand, is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Its core leadership consists of transnational jihadists who are engaging in a local conflict. Their framing strategies are forged through the crucible of war and are designed to downplay their true intentions. Their pragmatism is merely a diversion from their al-Qaeda affiliated goals. Compared to Ahrar and JAN, IS does not appear to be concerned with local resonance. Rather than compete at the local level, IS has scale shifted its media efforts to the global level. Its propaganda machine churns out a steady stream of motivational frames proclaiming the virtues and wonders of its caliphate, but those living in IS controlled areas are painfully aware of the truth. For all three groups, a potent mix of ideology, opportunity, and successful IO strategies have contributed to their rise and validates Brian Jenkins' statement that "the jihadists have become the cutting edge of the rebellion."[175]

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[175] Jenkins, *The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War,* 3.

IV. EXPERIENCE, ORGANIZATION, AND STRATEGY

The rise of radical Islamist groups is rarely the result of a linear process or one simple factor, which is why I refer to their rise in Syria as a puzzle. The previous chapter provided an explanation for the ideological section of the puzzle, but ideological coherence does not correlate necessarily with military prowess or resiliency. Insurgency theorists, such as Paul Staniland, contend that understanding how a group organizes to wage an insurgency is a better predictor of military success and organizational outcomes than violent ideologies.[176] Social movement theorists, such as Doug McAdam and Anthony Oberschall, add that a group organizes based on its available mobilizing structures and existing norms of behavior.[177] The implication of both assertions is that organizers of collective action are rational actors that draw from prior experiences. This chapter explores the institutional legacies of Syria's radical Islamists and examines how the remnants of these legacies have impacted their mobilization and growth.

Scholars such as Lefèvre and Khatib diligently traced the revival of Islamist movements in Syria such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) since their decimation in Hama in 1982.[178] Both authors demonstrated that Islamist groups and radical offshoots have established both formal and informal networks throughout Syria over the past 50 years and received invaluable experiences in the global jihad movement in Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition to their conclusions, others such as O'Bagy, Lund, and Ibrahim cited the robust logistical networks built by al-Qaeda affiliates fighting in the Iraq war in the mid-2000s.[179] The combination of all these events touches upon the formative experiences of Syria's radical Islamists. While all the aforementioned authors discuss the events, none trace exactly how the institutional legacies affected the

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[176] Staniland, "Insurgent Organization and State-Armed Group Relations," 38.

[177] Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 44.

[178] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*; Line Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria: The Rise and Fall of Ba'thist Secularism*.

[179] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*; Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*; Ibrahim, *the Resurgence of al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq*.

emergence and rise of Ahrar, JAN, and IS. Analyzing the institutional legacies in the context of which networks and tactics Ahrar, JAN, and IS leveraged to mobilize provides the next section of the puzzle. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the earlier struggles of Syrian radical Islamists shaped the current repertoires of contention and mobilizing structures that Ahrar, JAN, and IS used to proliferate in the current conflict.

After providing a theoretical overview of repertoires of contention and mobilizing structures, this chapter explores the evolution of the Syrian radical Islamist movement during three formative time periods: the Islamist opposition to Baathism from 1963 until 1982, the radical Islamist exodus to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Iraq War in the mid-2000s. After reviewing each time period, I identify key personalities who transformed the tactics and strategies used by Ahrar, JAN, and IS. I also investigate how Syria's local radical Islamist movement connects to the global jihad movement and how they established an indigenous network inside Syria. Lastly, I isolate the mobilizing structures that Ahrar, JAN, and IS leveraged and analyze how the preexisting networks impacted their emergence and growth. Since all three groups represent remnants from the same early struggles, there is overlap in the networks they used. As a result, this chapter applies the same general evolutions of strategy, tactics, and mobilizing structures to all and disaggregates them when possible.

A.   THE   BENEFIT   OF   PREWAR   NETWORKS: MOBILIZING STRUCTURES AND REPERTOIRES OF CONTENTION

Both social movement and insurgency theorists agree that the existence of prewar networks is a vital component of collective action and insurgencies. These networks enable groups to mobilize and sustain operations through mobilizing structures. McAdam defined mobilizing structures as "those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action."[180] For radical Islamists, these structures form the backbone of their mobilizing potential, which is typically through networks at the local, regional, and global levels. These networks provide

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[180] McAdam et al., "Introduction: Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Framing Processes," 3.

leadership, manpower, and valuable resources such as financing and weapons. Prewar networks also facilitate social learning and shape repertoires of contention.

According to Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, repertoires are a "by-product of everyday experiences" that are "handed down and reproduced over time."[181] Thus, the repertoires of contention used by radical Islamists stem from their prior experiences. Also, their decision to adopt certain strategies and tactics often depends on their proximity to previous movements or relational and nonrelational diffusion.[182] Relational diffusion is the transfer of innovative tactics through the face-to-face interactions of those within activist networks whereas nonrelational diffusion is the transfer of tactics through non-personal means, such as publications and the Internet.[183] In Syria, Ahrar, JAN, and IS learned extensively through both types of diffusion. Using mobilizing structures and repertoires of contention as a backdrop, the remainder of this chapter explores the origins and evolution of the networks and tactics Syria's radical Islamists developed over time and leveraged in the current conflict.

B.   THE INSTITUTIONAL LEGACIES OF SYRIA'S RADICAL ISLAMISTS

Three key periods formed the basis of the institutional legacies of Syria's radical Islamists: the Islamist opposition to Baathism from 1963 until 1982, which culminated in the Islamist Uprising from 1976 until 1982; the radical Islamist exodus to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s; and the Iraq War in the mid-2000s. Numerous scholars have exhaustively covered each time period from a historical perspective. As a result, the following sections focus on key individuals who shaped the repertoires of contention that Syria's radical Islamists use today and the development of local, regional, and global networks.

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[181] Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 182.

[182] Ibid*.,* 182.

[183] Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq*, 23.

1. The Islamist Opposition to Baathism from 1963 until 1982

Following the Baathist coup in 1963, Syria's Islamist movement led by the SMB found itself in a difficult situation. Prior to the coup, the SMB represented a budding political force. It held parliamentary level positions in the government and also had considerable economic ties to the urban merchant class.[184] However, once the Baathists enacted radical socialist reforms, promoted secular policies, and banned the SMB in 1964, its members lost their political influence and economic livelihood.

The SMB also faced a leadership crisis at the same time. Its different geographic factions disagreed over how to respond to the Baath regime's political repression and the role of religion in politics.[185] The Damascus wing favored a non-violent approach and believed the Syrian government should have Islamic representation.[186] Other branches in Aleppo, Hama, and Homs viewed armed struggle against the Baathists as a necessity and believed the government should be entirely Islamic; however, they disagreed over which methods of armed struggle to use.[187] The Damascus wing dominated the SMB in the 1960s but gradually lost control of the more radical factions. Of the militant divisions, Hama represented the most extreme. Out of which, radical leaders like Marwan Hadid emerged and permanently changed the behavioral norm dynamics of the Syrian Islamist movement.

To explain changes in norm dynamics, Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink developed a theory consisting of three stages: norm emergence, norm cascade, and internalization.[188] Their theory can be applied to radical Islamist innovators who created and molded the current repertoires of contention seen today. During the first stage of norm emergence, a norm entrepreneur introduces changes through an organizational

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[184] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 40 and 53.

[185] Ibid., xvi.

[186] Liad Porat, *The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad Regime* (Waltham, MA: the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, 2010), 2, http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb47 html.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 4, vol. 52 (Autumn, 1998): 896.

platform.[189]   As the behavioral changes take root, networks supporting norm entrepreneurs facilitate the norm cascade stage by dispersing the new norms through a process of socialization.[190]   After the new norms are accepted and institutionalized by a critical mass, the movement internalizes them.[191]   For Syria, Hadid was the first radical Islamist norm entrepreneur, or jihad entrepreneur.

a.   *Marwan Hadid: Syria's First Jihad Entrepreneur*

In both life and death, Hadid has been an active force in shaping the Syrian radical Islamist movement. He came from a prosperous farming family in Hama and was an avid member of the SMB from an early age.[192]   In the early 1960s, he studied agricultural engineering in Egypt and became a close associate of Sayyid Qutb who was a prominent ideologue and leader in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.[193]   As some scholars have labeled Qutb "the philosopher of Islamic Terror," his influence on Hadid was significant.[194]   Qutb advocated the use of violence to overthrow regimes that violated the terms of Islamic law, and his immediate target was Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the then-president of Egypt. Qutb called for a top-down approach to revolution and preached that it needed to be initiated by a "vanguard" of believers.[195]   Under Qutb's tutelage, Hadid adopted the same immutable beliefs and was resolute that there can be no compromise between Islam and non-Islamic systems of governance.[196]   Armed with Qutb's ideas of revolutionary jihad, Hadid returned to Syria in 1963 convinced that violent action alone would accomplish political change.

After the Baathist coup in 1963 and the prominence of Alawites in the Baathist ranks, Hadid and another radical SMB leader from Hama Sa'id Hawwa promulgated

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[189] Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," 896–901.

[190] Ibid., 902.

[191] Ibid., 904.

[192] Umar F. Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1983), 104.

[193] Ibid.

[194] Paul Berman, "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003, http://www nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-philosopher-of-islamic-terror html.

[195] Euben and Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 132.

[196] Abd-Allah, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, 104.

Qutb's ideas while resurrecting Ibn Tamiyyah's anti-Alawite sectarian fatwas.[197] The outcome of this potent ideological mix was groundbreaking for future radical Islamists. According to Bernard Haykel, the modern ideological origins of sectarian extremism today are traced back to this time period in Syria.[198] Hadid and Hawwa provided the blueprint for future generations of radicals in Syria and Iraq such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the leaders of Ahrar, JAN, and IS to justify sectarian terrorism.

While Hadid was initially a member of the SMB, he did not represent the movement. His small group of followers in Hama was on the fringes, and there is no evidence that they acted as a military arm under the explicit orders of the SMB in the 1960s.[199] Notably, the majority of SMB leaders disagreed with Hadid's tactics and discourse, but they were unable to control him. Nevertheless, the Baathist regime held the SMB culpable for Hadid's actions and exiled the SMB leader Issam al-Attar in 1964.[200]

Hadid used al-Attar's exile as an excuse to turn his words into deeds when he started the 1964 Hama riots, which lasted for 29 days.[201] During the riots, Hadid and his followers worked the crowds into a frenzy with sectarian chants while referring to the Baath party as the enemy of Islam.[202] The riots quickly turned violent as Hadid tried to lead an armed insurrection that led to the brutal death of a local member of the Baath National Guard.[203] The event ended when Hadid and his followers sought refuge in a local mosque and surrendered after being attacked by government forces. Those who were not killed were arrested and sentenced to death; however, their lives were spared after prominent leaders in the religious establishment intervened.[204]

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[197] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 101.

[198] Bernard Haykel, "Chapter 9: Jihadis and the Shia," in *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qaeda and its Periphery*, edited by Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), 206.

[199] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 101; Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, 48.

[200] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 93.

[201] Ibid., 45 and 101.

[202] Ibid., 45.

[203] Seale and McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle*, 93.

[204] Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Musab Al-Suri* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38.

As Finnemore and Sikkink's paradigm illustrates, a norms entrepreneur must have an organizational platform to initiate change. Hadid knew his actions were at odds with the moderate SMB leaders, and they would not support his military activities. As a result, he had to create his own militant platform. He and his followers left Syria in the late 1960s and made contact with "the Godfather of Jihad" Abdallah Azzam with the assistance of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan.[205] Azzam established a network of Palestinian military training centers for jihadist fighters in Jordan and welcomed Hadid and his contingent when they arrived. The exact details of the training Hadid and his men received is unknown, but according to Lefèvre, he and his group returned to Syria after Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1970 with renewed vigor and confidence in their military skills and ability to attract more followers.[206]

Upon his return, the SMB distanced itself from Hadid's activities. Based on a testimonial from Syria's second jihad entrepreneur Abu Musab al-Suri, Hadid responded, "If the [SMB] throw me out the door, I will get in from the window, and I will drag them to jihad," which is exactly what he did.[207] Hadid aggressively recruited like-minded youths from the SMB and established cells in Hama, Aleppo, and Damascus.[208] In 1973, he activated his cells and began a vicious assassination campaign on senior Baathist security officials.[209] In 1974, he broke ties with the SMB and, inspired by Qutbist principles, created Syria's first radical Islamist group the Fighting Vanguard of the Mujahidin (hereafter referred to as the Fighting Vanguard).[210]

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[205] Thomas Hegghammer, "Abdallah Azzam, the Imam of Jihad," in *Al Qaeda in its own words*, edited by Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 81; Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 141; Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria,* 49.

[206] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 109.

[207] Jim Lacey, ed., *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 110.

[208] Ibid., 109.

[209] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 102.

[210] Ibid.

Hadid was arrested in 1975, and after significant torture, he died in prison in 1976.[211] His death sparked an unprecedented spike in radical Islamist violence and initiated an uprising that lasted until 1982. Hadid transformed Syria's radical Islamist movement and has become a legend in jihadist circles. To illustrate his impact, Azzam personally wrote Hadid's eulogy to celebrate his martyrdom and documented key events in Hadid's life for future generations.[212]

After Hadid's death, the Fighting Vanguard brazenly stepped up its assassination campaign against Baathist officials. When its leaders attacked the Syrian military's artillery school in Aleppo in 1979 and massacred 83 Alawite cadets, they brought the conflict to a new level.[213] According to Khatib, the attack represented a turning point in the Syrian regime's response to Islamism.[214] The regime used the attack as justification for extreme state repression against all Islamist factions, whether radical or not, and in 1980, the SMB felt forced to formally declare a jihad against the Syrian regime.[215] By 1982, the leaders of the Fighting Vanguard and the SMB made a fateful decision to call for a mass uprising and confronted the regime in Hama.[216] Most were annihilated as the regime employed overwhelming violence by indiscriminately leveling the city. Those who managed to escape eventually made their way to Azzam for assistance.

b.   *Impact on Ahrar, JAN, and IS*

It may seem somewhat tenuous to link Hadid directly to Ahrar, JAN, and IS, but his role as a Syrian jihad entrepreneur is undeniable. He fundamentally and indelibly altered the radical Islamist repertoires of contention at the macro level. He was the first to introduce Qutb's concepts in Syria and melded them with Ibn Taymiyyah's fatwas, which placed a unique sectarian twist on revolutionary jihad. The sectarian rhetoric witnessed in

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[211] Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*

[212] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 215–217.

[213] Ibid., 105.

[214] Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, 74.

[215] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 109.

[216] Ibid.

the region throughout the 21st century is Hadid's legacy, and nowhere has it been more visible than Syria and Iraq.

Hadid provided a baseline for the powerful ideology used by Ahrar, JAN, and IS. Currently, there are no other ideological alternatives in the Syrian conflict that provides such a polar contrast to Baathism, which is attractive for those in Syria that have been the recipients of state-sponsored repression in the current conflict. Additionally, the tactics Hadid introduced in the late 1960s, such as assassinations, car bombings, and small unit ambushes, provided an important historical context for the methods witnessed today.[217] According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Hadid's publication entitled *A Call to Muslims* continues to be a popular text on jihadist websites.[218]

Aside from repertoires of contention, Hadid linked his local jihad with a regional network when he and his men trained in Azzam's camps. The connections he forged not only catapulted his efforts in Syria but also provided a lifeline to the movement that most thought was destroyed in 1982. The regional network of supporters, fellow jihadists, and recruiters was paramount to the next critical time period for Syrian radicals. Overall, Hadid was the original pioneer of the Syrian radical Islamist movement and the paradigm he established became the launch pad for future innovations to take place. When Abu Musab al-Zarqawi unleashed sectarian warfare in Iraq, his rhetoric and tactics were reminiscent of Hadid and the Fighting Vanguard. It is also no surprise that numerous radical groups in the Syrian conflict today bear his name or some element of his legacy in their title such as the Marwan Hadid Brigades that are closely allied with JAN.[219]

2. From Local to Global: The Radical Islamist Exodus in the 1980s and 1990s

While the Hama Uprising in 1982 represented a catastrophic loss inside Syria, the immediate aftermath prompted an expansion of Syrian radical networks at the regional

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[217] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 12.

[218] William McCants, *Militant Ideology Atlas* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), 9 and 227.

[219] Adaki Oren, "Abdallah Azzam Brigades Launches Launches Rocket Attacks from Gaza," *Threat Matrix Blog*, July 15, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/07/abdullah_azzam_brigades_launch.php.

level. Those that survived fled to neighboring countries Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and others. They initially relied on the networks Hadid had established. Over the span of a year, the veterans of the Fighting Vanguard created new networks while trying to reignite the Syrian jihad.[220] In 1983, the Fighting Vanguard regrouped, and as they infiltrated back into Syria, the regime captured the group's most prominent leader, Adnan Uqlah.[221] Following Uqlah's capture, the remaining members abandoned their local jihad temporarily and began to focus their ideological and organizational expertise on the global jihad movement. In 1984, Syria's radical Islamists reached out to Azzam and his son-in-law, Abdallah Anas, for assistance in joining the Afghan Arabs to wage jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan.[222]

Beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing through the 1990s, Syrian radicals found a home in Afghanistan and thrived in jihadist and al-Qaeda training camps where their military experience was a prized commodity.[223] Their Afghan exodus enabled the Syrian radicals to continue evolving. It also solidified an organic connection between them and global jihadists who would later form al-Qaeda such as Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.[224] However, despite shifting focus to a transnational jihad, the Syrian radicals kept their local ambitions alive. Of all the Syrians who traveled to Afghanistan, none rival the impact and legacy in the conflict today as Abu Musab al-Suri.

a. Abu Musab al-Suri: Syria's Second Jihad Entrepreneur

"The most dangerous terrorist you have never heard of," "the foremost jihadi theoretician," and "the principle architect of al-Qaeda's post-9/11 structure and strategy" are just a few of the labels used to describe Mustafa bin Abd al-Qader Sit Mariam Nassar

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[220] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 52.

[221] Ibid., 51.

[222] Ibid., 73.

[223] Ibid., and Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria,* 143.

[224] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 138 and Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, 195.

aka Abu Musab al-Suri.[225] According to Michael Ryan, al-Suri combines the rare combination of practical experience and strategic thought among jihadi strategists.[226] While Hadid was the first norm entrepreneur who created an organizational platform to introduce behavioral changes, al-Suri was the successor that socialized, advanced, and spread the norms through relational and nonrelational diffusion on an unprecedented level. His efforts were instrumental in not only internalizing new norms but also in spurring the evolution of violent mutations in jihadi repertoires.

Al-Suri's radical career started at the age of 21 when he joined the Fighting Vanguard in 1980.[227] After participating in a series of raids in Syria, his cell was compromised, and he and surviving members sought refuge with Jordanian contacts Hadid and his successors had formalized.[228] Between 1980 and 1982, al-Suri trained extensively in Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt where he underwent advanced courses in urban guerilla warfare, explosives, and weapons training.[229] During each course, al-Suri stood out as the star pupil, and as a result, the Fighting Vanguard handpicked him to lead an Aleppo offensive in 1982, despite his young age.[230] Prior to the offensive, the Hama uprising occurred, which mortally wounded the movement. Al-Suri and the remaining members scattered to neighboring countries and regrouped in 1984 to continue their jihad against the Baathists. Their efforts failed, and al-Suri relocated to Spain where he began his transition into one of the most infamous, globetrotting terrorists in the world.

While Hadid's legacy is rooted in his leadership, al-Suri's greatest contributions are as an author, trainer, and connector of global terrorist groups. Al-Suri has become one of the most prolific authors on jihadi strategy. He has published countless articles in al-Qaeda magazines, like *Inspire*, and on prominent jihadi web forums, such as *al-Ansar*, *al-*

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[225] Lacey, *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad*, xi; Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab al Suri: Architect of the New al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007): 1; Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 8.

[226] Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy; the Deep Battle against America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 191.

[227] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 39.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid., 40–46.

[230] Ibid., 47.

Hisbah, and *al-Ikhlas*, but he is most known for two books: *The Islamic Jihadist Revolution in Syria* and *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*.[231] For Syrian radicals fighting in the current conflict, *The Islamic Jihadist Revolution in Syria* is their manifesto. In the book, al-Suri carefully documented and analyzed the Syrian jihadist experience during the Islamist uprising in a 900-page volume.[232] He is the first and only member of the Fighting Vanguard to have done so. He critiqued their failure with brutal honesty. Based on his intense study of Western military literature and classics in guerilla warfare, he identified 17 reasons for their defeat and believed the most important was the lack of an overall strategy before starting the insurrection.[233] His observations encourage pragmatism, and he places special emphasis on winning the hearts and minds of the people. His recommendations demonstrated how to mask Hadid's sectarian, revolutionary jihad with elements of Mao Tse Tung's and Che Guevara's strategies and Machiavelli's principles.[234]

As important as *The Islamic Jihadist Revolution in Syria* is to Syrian radicals, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* is just as, if not more, important to the global jihad movement. The book is al-Suri's *magnum opus* and has become the most significant written source in jihadi strategic studies pertaining to al-Qaeda.[235] Al-Suri expanded on ideas from his Syrian writings and began articulating a new strategy for global jihad during his time in Afghanistan in 2000.[236] According to Brynjar Lia, al-Suri advocates "a global terrorist campaign against the West that would rely on diffuse, decentralized, and non-hierarchical networks."[237] Basically, he was the first jihadi intellectual to promote a leaderless jihad or lone-wolf terrorism that is the scourge of security services around the world, and his ideological fingerprint seems to appear on everything. His works have been found on virtually every computer of captured terrorists, which has led

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[231] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 7 and 13.

[232] Ibid., 60.

[233] Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, 199.

[234] Ibid.

[235] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 7.

[236] Cruickshank and Ali, "Abu Musab al Suri: Architect of the New al Qaeda," 8.

[237] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 6.

some to accuse him of being the mastermind of all global terror. While it is impossible to be responsible for all attacks, it illustrates his impact on an entire generation of Islamic radicals, which is why experts such as Lia, Paul Cruickshank, and Mohannad Hage Ali refer to al-Suri as more of an architect than a direct, hands-on contributor to spectacular attacks.[238]

The contributions of al-Suri's writings fall into the nonrelational diffusion category, but his work as a trainer in jihadist and specialized al-Qaeda camps represent relational diffusion. From 1987 until 1992 and from 1997 until 2001, al-Suri shared his military knowledge on explosives, chemicals, hand-to-hand combat, and guerilla warfare as well as his intellectual pursuits directly with countless jihadists in Afghanistan.[239] He served in the Sada, Zhawar, and al-Farouq camps during his first stint and the al-Ghuraba and Derunta camps during his second.[240] He actually commanded the al-Ghuraba camp located in Kabul, Afghanistan, with the approval of the Taliban.[241] Al-Suri's classroom lectures became his laboratories to hone and refine his lethal trade, and the who's who of the most infamous terrorists in the 21st century such as the 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaykh Muhammad and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were trained at camps where al-Suri taught.[242]

The last element of al-Suri's role as an entrepreneur was his link between different terrorist groups and cells. By his own admission, he became one of the early members of al-Qaeda in the late 1980s, but he eventually had a falling out with Usama bin Laden over strategy.[243] Just as al-Suri's written word could be harshly blunt, his spoken word and straightforward demeanor caused friction at times with senior leaders like bin Laden. As a result, al-Suri became more of an independent and lobbied for global collaboration, which placed ideology above loyalties to any specific group. During the

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[238] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 8.

[239] Ibid., 79–88 and 229–313.

[240] Ibid., 254.

[241] Ibid., 252

[242] Ibid., 82; Lacey, *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad*, viii.

[243] Cruickshank and Ali, "Abu Musab al Suri: Architect of the New al Qaeda," 4.

1980s and 1990s, al-Suri relentlessly promoted a jihad in Syria and used his vast network of students to endorse other jihadist causes such as the Abu Dahdah cell in Madrid responsible for the 2004 train bombings and the Algerian jihad for al-Jamaah al-Islamiyyah al-Musallahah (known by its French acronym GIA).[244] He was also the primary facilitator for bin Laden's media interviews during the mid-1990s.[245] Al-Suri attempted to create a Syrian group to be affiliated with al-Qaeda and lobbied for support from Syria's exiled Islamist ideologues.[246] To his dismay, he was unable to procure the support he needed to establish an indigenous infrastructure and opted for strategic patience rather than hasty action. Once the Iraq War began in 2003, it was many of al-Suri's former students who seized the initiative to establish the vast foreign fighter ratlines throughout Syria, and despite their rage towards the Syrian regime, they patiently waited for the right time as al-Suri would have recommended.

In late 2005, Pakistani authorities captured al-Suri in Quetta and reportedly transferred him to U.S. control in exchange for a $5 million ransom.[247] After a stretch at Guantanamo Bay, al-Suri was reportedly transferred in 2006 to Syria.[248] Since then, the Syrian regime reportedly released him sometime between late 2011 and early 2012.[249] He has not been seen since.

b.   Impact on Ahrar, JAN, and IS

Regardless of his current whereabouts, al-Suri has had a major impact on Syrian and global jihadists. He took the platform that Hadid built and turned it into a latent, practical blueprint for success when the time finally arrived to assault the Syrian regime. From a strategic perspective, Ahrar and JAN (and IS to a degree) are lethal mutations that al-Suri influenced; their insurgent strategies are his legacy.

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[244] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 118.

[245] Ibid., 166.

[246] Ibid., 131–136.

[247] Ibid., 346.

[248] Ibid.

[249] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 15; Bill Roggio, "Abu Musab al Suri Released from Syrian Custody: Report," *The Long War Journal*, February 6, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/02/abu_musab_al_suri_re.php.

For example, JAN's leaders publicly stated in 2014 on Twitter that they are basing their insurgent strategy on al-Suri's recommendations, which helps to explain the success of JAN's approach.[250] It focuses on rural areas, masks its extremism, and fosters strong relationships with the people and other opposition groups. Despite being al-Qaeda's affiliate, JAN's al-Suri-inspired pragmatic strategy has been highly effective, which the United States witnessed firsthand in 2012 after formally designating the group as a terrorist organization.[251] Rather than isolate JAN from the opposition, the designation brought it positive media attention in Syria, and numerous rebel groups and members of the SNC publicly denounced the terrorist label.[252] Additionally, 29 opposition groups signed a petition supporting JAN and began using the slogan "No to American intervention, for we are all Jabhat al-Nusra."[253] While it is relatively common for entities in the Middle East to reject U.S. designations of terrorism, the mass show of support that the secular opposition gave to JAN is unprecedented for an al-Qaeda affiliate, which is attributed to the successful application of al-Suri's principles.

Al-Suri's influence on Ahrar is just as direct. Abu Khalid al-Suri who was one of Abu Musab al-Suri's closest associates was a founding member of Ahrar.[254] Given that he and Abu Musab were inseparable throughout the 1990s, it is reasonable to assume he endorsed Abu Musab's writings. Ahrar's willingness to work directly with other groups, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and its attempts to portray itself as a nationalist Salafi organization to minimize the visibility of its radical inclinations is evidence of Abu Musab al-Suri's influence. Additionally, Hassan Abboud, the most

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[250] Hassan, "A Jihadist Blueprint for Hearts and Minds is Gaining Traction in Syria, "

[251] "US Blacklists Syrian Rebel Group al-Nusra," *Al Jazeera*, December 11, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012121117048117723.html.

[252] Tony Karon, "While U.S. Recognizes Syrian Opposition, It Designates One Anti-Assad Group as 'Terrorist,'" *Time*, December 11, 2012, http://world.time.com/2012/12/11/why-the-u-s-has-designated-one-anti-assad-group-as-terrorist/.

[253] Ruth Sherlock, "Syrian Rebels Defy U.S. and Pledge Allegiance to Jihadi Group," *The Telegraph*, December 10, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9735988/Syrian-rebels-defy-US-and-pledge-allegiance-to-jihadi-group html

[254] Lia, *Architect of Global* Jihad, 189.

prominent Ahrar leader before his death in 2014, publicly stated that Abu Musab al-Suri's writings have influenced his strategies.[255]

Al-Suri also shaped IS's tactics to a degree. According to Murad Batal al-Shishani, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, IS's founding father, implemented some of al-Suri's recommendations in his strategic planning for Iraq such as creating a centralized command and control structure, presenting a consolidated media campaign, and generating internal revenue streams rather than relying solely on outside support.[256] However, al-Zarqawi miserably failed to attract local support, which al-Suri cited was a mistake Syria's jihadist also made in *The Islamic Jihadist Revolution in Syria*.[257]

Additionally, when IS released its highly refined and polished propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, it explicitly stated that its insurgent strategy is a continuation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's strategic vision for the region.[258] According to Ryan, *Dabiq* also contains influences by al-Suri: "*Dabiq* provides the first admission, albeit indirectly, that the Islamic State…has been following a strategy…informed by the teachings of Abu Musab al-Suri."[259] Despite traces of al-Suri's teachings, he would most likely believe that IS's overall strategy of clear, hold, and build is a recipe for disaster, and being tied to fixed territories will allow the United States and its allies to map, exploit, and attack IS eventually. While each of the main groups use different portions of al-Suri's writings, the implication is clear: his works are a central component to their overall strategies, and his writings on Syria remain the only intensive studies conducted by a jihadist on the radical Islamist experience against the Syrian regime.

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[255] Charles Lister, "Syria's Evolving Salafists Suffer a Crippling Blow," *The World Post*, September 10, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-lister/syrias-evolving-salafists_b_5795682.html.

[256] Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Jabhat al-Nusra's New Syrian Strategy," *Al-Monitor*, January 14, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-new-strategy-in-syria html#.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Harleen K. Gambhir, *Dabiq: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War), 7, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/dabiq-strategic-messaging-islamic-state.

[259] Michael W. S. Ryan, *Hot Issue: Dabiq: What Islamic State's New Magazine Tells Us about Their Strategic Direction, Recruitment Patterns, and Guerrilla Doctrine* (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2014), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42702&no_cache=1#.VOjIDsarZl8

In addition to innovating current repertoires of contention, al-Suri also helped establish the strong link of Syria's local jihad to the global jihad movement. These transnational links are highly visible in the conflict today. According to Ken Dilanian, more than 20,000 foreign fighters from over 90 countries have traveled to Syria to wage jihad, and the primary recipients of these fighters are Ahrar, JAN, and IS.[260] They are using the vast global network of recruiters, facilitators, and methods that al-Suri and his Syrian radical brethren initially helped to materialize. While the global network of radical Islamists is bigger than any one person, al-Suri's writings, his lessons as an instructor, and his global connections made him an important component in facilitating mass diffusion.

The first two formative periods for Syrian radicals produced robust networks at the global and regional levels as wells as a virtual database of do's and don'ts when fighting the regime. However, neither period produced the local networks for mobilization and support that al-Suri cited as a requirement for a successful jihad. It was not until the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) in 2003 that an indigenous network took shape.

3. The Iraq War in the mid-2000s

Operation Iraqi Freedom was a boon for Syrian jihadists. They had a place to fight an external enemy (United States) close to their home country, and the Syrian regime opted to use them as an extension of its foreign policy.[261] As long as the jihadists avoided attacks in Syria, they were granted passage to Iraq to fight the United States.

Due to its unsecured, remote border with Iraq stretching more than 460 miles, Syria became the foreign fighter corridor during the Iraq war, especially from 2003 until 2007.[262] According to Aaron Zelin, roughly 4,000 to 5,000 foreigners traveled to Iraq,

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[260] Ken Dilanian, "20,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Syria, Iraq," *Associated Press*, February 11, 2015, http://www military.com/daily-news/2015/02/11/20000-foreign-fighters-flock-to-syria-iraq html; Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria* (Washington, DC: The Soufan Group, 2014), 8 and 22, http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/.

[261] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 15.

[262] Bill Roggio, "US Strike in Syria 'Decapitated' al Qaeda's Facilitation Network," *The Long War Journal*, October 27, 2008, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/10/us_strike_in_syria_d.php.

and Lefèvre estimated that 90% of all the foreign fighters traveled through Syria.[263] Of all the foreign fighters, Syrian nationals represented the third largest contingent in Iraq as roughly 100 local facilitators in Syria coordinated their travel.[264]

In addition to the overall number of experienced fighters, one of the most important aspects for the current Syrian conflict has been the logistics infrastructure that facilitators meticulously developed to support the influx of fighters. Syrian radicals that the regime banned from entering the country were cautiously allowed in, and they brought their experiences to share with a younger generation. They established safe houses and robust networks in both rural and urban areas under the watchful eye of the Syrian regime. Given the regime's vigilant reputation, one might assume the facilitators had direct contact with members of Syria's security apparatus. If so, the entire experience gave Syrian radicals updated information on their perfect enemy: the regime. They also obtained institutional knowledge of how to traverse and operate in Syria.[265]

In 2007, the Syrian regime began to crack down on the networks under international pressure led by the United States, but the damage had been done. The networks did not disappear: they simply deactivated until the right moment to engage. The radical Islamists demonstrated deliberate strategic patience by not attacking the regime during the Iraq war because they did not feel they were strong enough to confront the regime in civil war.[266] As a result, between 2003 and 2007, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's network formed the nucleus of the foreign fighter ratline while smaller networks under the groups Ghuraba al-Sham and Fatah al-Islam contributed as well.[267] When combined, these networks formed the basis of the radical Islamist mobilization in the current conflict.

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[263] Aaron Zelin, *The Return of Sunni Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-return-of-sunni-foreign-fighters-in-iraq; Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 148.

[264] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 148 and O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 15.

[265] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 15.

[266] Khatib, *Islamic Revivalism in Syria*, 196.

[267] Ibid., 194–195 and O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 14.

a.   *Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Foreign Fighter Network*

Following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, radical Islamists from the global jihad movement lost their coveted Afghan safe haven. Many surreptitiously left the country to include a group from the Levant region who trained in a camp commanded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Herat, Afghanistan.[268]   Under al-Zarqawi's leadership, the group traveled through Iran in 2002 and settled in Northern Iraq. According to Nomen Benotman and Blake Roisin, al-Zarqawi directed Syrian members of his contingent in 2003 to establish a logistics network inside Syria, which proved to be a highly prescient decision.[269] Given Syria's desolate border with Iraq and countless ancient smuggling routes, al-Zarqawi's men seemed to have little difficulty establishing the necessary local ties in their home country.

They were facilitated as well by fortuitous circumstances. According to Lesch, the presence of 150,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq worried the al-Assad regime that it could be next after Iraq became stabilized.[270] Considering Syria has been on the U.S. Department of State's official list of state sponsors of terrorism since 1979, al-Assad's concerns seemed legitimate to others in his regime, and they welcomed the possibility of tying U.S. forces down in Iraq.[271] As a result, Syria assisted al-Zarqawi's nascent network by allowing facilitators and fighters to travel back and forth across the border unmolested. By 2004, the United States began to publicly question Syria's role in facilitating the terrorists.[272]

Between 2003 and 2005, al-Zarqawi's network became more formalized. For example, a jihadist under the pen name al-Muhajir al-Islami published a manual titled *The New Road to Mesopotamia* that provided guidance and insight to those entering Syria

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[268] Benotman and Roisin, *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

[269] Ibid.

[270] Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, 14–55.

[271] O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 13.

[272] "U.S. Sees Syria 'Facilitating' Insurgents," *The Washington Times*, April 20, 2004, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/apr/20/20040420-115628-7182r/?page=all.

to wage jihad in Iraq.[273] Aside from general advice to include tips on dealing with Syrian security officials, the manual specified Iraqi crossing points and provided atmospherics such as relationships with local tribes and descriptions of the terrain.[274]

During this time period, U.S. forces in Iraq actively targeted al-Zarqawi's facilitators and identified Badran Turki Hisham al-Mazidi, aka Abu Ghadiya, as al-Zarqawi's commander of the Syrian logistics network.[275] Abu Ghadiya, originally from Damascus, traveled to Afghanistan in the late-1990s to train in jihadist camps.[276] While there, he settled in Herat, became a close associate of al-Zarqawi, and was among his contingent that fled Afghanistan for Iraq in 2001.[277] During the war, Abu Ghadiya made a name for himself leading foreign fighters in the Fallujah battles in 2004. Following Fallujah, al-Zarqawi promoted him to be the head of the foreign fighter network in Syria.[278] Throughout this time period, Abu Ghadiya was high on the targeting list of U.S. forces, and he and all of his associates were carefully tracked.[279] He established his base of operations in the town of Albu Kamal, Syria across the border from al Qaim, Iraq, and appointed his brother and cousins to leadership positions under his tutelage.[280] In a situation resembling a cat and mouse game, Abu Ghadiya spent the next few years crossing the border back and forth and evading capture.

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[273] Bill Roggio, "The Ratline Manual," *The Long War Journal*, August 2, 2005, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/08/the_ratline_man_1.php.

[274] Ibid.

[275] United States Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Members of Abu Ghadiyah's Network Facilitates flow of terrorists, weapons, and money from Syria to al Qaida in Iraq," news release, February 28, 2008, http://web.archive.org/web/20080304030317/http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/hp845.htm.

[276] "Profile: Abu Ghadiya," *BBC*, October 28, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7695913.stm.

[277] Ibid.

[278] United States Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Members of Abu Ghadiyah's Network."

[279] This is based on the author's experience from multiple deployments to Iraq between 2003 and 2007.

[280] United States Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Members of Abu Ghadiyah's Network."

On 11 September 2007, U.S. Forces gained unprecedented insight into the foreign fighter network when they targeted and killed "Muthana," ISI's leader of the border area between Syria and Iraq, in a raid near the town of Sinjar, Iraq.[281] Aside from killing Muthana, the raid resulted in a treasure trove of documents containing over 600 biographic records of foreign fighters who traveled to Iraq from Syria between August 2006 and August 2007.[282] The cache of documents has become known as the Sinjar records.

In addition to detailed biographic information on the fighters, the Sinjar records provided incredible insight into how the foreign fighter network operated. For example, fighters documented the name of their Syrian coordinator and the physical description.[283] They were also asked to list how much they paid the coordinator, to specify the route they took once in Syria, and to rate their overall experience.[284] Based on analysis from the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the Sinjar records showed that the Syrian city of Dayr al-Zawr was the main logistics point, and the foreign fighter network relied on smugglers for assistance.[285] The use of smugglers and criminal networks led some to question how extensive the network was, but the reality is the foreign fighter network was just as diffuse and undefined as most networks associated with the global jihad movement.[286] Despite the use of smugglers, a network of safe houses and AQ-affiliated facilitators at some level had to have been formally established to facilitate the flow of 4,000 to 5,000 fighters. Additionally, as the leader of the Syrian network, Abu Ghadiya more than likely had some degree of oversight of the process.

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[281] Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Iraq Operative Killed Near Syrian Border Sheds Light on Foreign Influence," *The Long War Journal*, October 3, 2007, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/10/al_qaeda_in_iraq_ope.php.

[282] Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: The First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), 3, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaidas-foreign-fighters-in-iraq-a-first-look-at-the-sinjar-records.

[283] Ibid., 25.

[284] Ibid.

[285] Ibid., 21 and 28.

[286] Fishman and Felter, *Al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: The First Look at the Sinjar Records*, 27–28.

In October 2008, U.S. forces received permission to cross into Syria to kill or capture Abu Ghadiya.[287] Abu Ghadiya, his brother, and two cousins were killed along with a slew of other foreigners. While Abu Ghadiya and his lieutenants/family were killed, the network was not destroyed. According to Lund, the Syrian government tacitly agreed with the United States and the Iraqi government during the same time period to arrest those involved with the networks.[288] Thus, Abu Ghadiya's death coincided with most of his network facilitators, remaining fighters, and sympathizers being thrown in jail. The Syrian regime placed the majority of them in Sednaya prison with other former Islamist political prisoners located outside of Damascus, which would become an important mobilizing structure for Ahrar and JAN.[289] Also in 2008, U.S. and Iraqi forces began to methodically dismantle ISI (now IS) and arrested many of the group's foreign fighters. All were imprisoned in Camp Bucca located in Southern Iraq, and in 2008, Syrians constituted the highest number of third country nationals detained at Camp Bucca followed by Saudi Arabians and Egyptians.[290] Just as Sednaya played an important mobilizing role for Ahrar and JAN, Camp Bucca did the same for IS. Despite the foreign fighter network losing its leader in 2008, Abu Ghadiya's legacy continues today. His networks went dormant between 2008 and 2010 and were reactivated in 2011. In March 2014, JAN demonstrated to the world Abu Ghadiya's importance to its cause when it released a propaganda video announcing the formation of its new jihadist training camp: the Abu Ghadiya camp.[291]

b.   Impact to Ahrar, JAN, and IS

Of all the institutional legacies of the radical Islamist movement in Syria, the Iraq war and the foreign fighter network had the most profound impact on Ahrar, JAN, and

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[287] Roggio, "US Strike in Syria 'Decapitated al Qaeda's Facilitation Network."

[288] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 8.

[289] Ibid.

[290] Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, "Becoming a Foreign Fighter: A Second Look at the Sinjar Records," in *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qaida's Road in and out of Iraq*, edited by Brian Fishman (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), 35–36.

[291] Bill Roggio, "Al Nusrah Front Names Training Camps After Top Al Qaeda Leaders," *The Long War Journal*, March 17, 2014,
http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/al_nusrah_front_name.php.

IS's ability to mobilize experienced leaders and fighters. For leadership, the importance of Sednaya prison and Camp Bucca cannot be overstated for the three groups. In their book *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us*, McCauley and Moskalenko referred to prisons containing terrorists as "prison universities" where terrorists obtain new skills, ideologies, and contacts.[292] Using a similar analogy, Sednaya and Camp Bucca became jihad universities that served as informal mobilizing structures for leadership by linking individuals who were already committed to a common cause.

Shortly after the Syrian uprising began in 2011, the al-Assad regime conducted a mass release of Islamist prisoners held in Sednaya. The regime claimed it released the prisoners under a general amnesty, but the common narrative is the regime wanted to portray the uprising as being led by Islamic terrorists.[293] Its rationale was it wanted to force the international community to choose between the lesser of two evils: the regime or terrorists. It also tried to prevent an international force from intervening in the conflict like in Libya. The regime's plan succeeded in stalling an international response, but it opened Pandora's box.

Beginning with Ahrar, the majority of its initial leadership was imprisoned in Sednaya and released together.[294] Most were veterans of the Iraq war as well.[295] Ahrar's leaders also leveraged their Sednaya contacts to formalize alliances. When Ahrar's former leader Hassan Abboud agreed to join forces with the largest bloc of Islamist groups called the Islamic Front in November 2013, it was hardly a surprise. Roughly half of the group leaders in the Islamic Front were imprisoned together in Sednaya reportedly in the same cell block: Zahran Aloush of Jaish al Islam, Abdul Rahman Suweis of Liwa

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[292] McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 106–108.

[293] Justin Vela and Suha Maayeh, "Assad Regime Released Extremists from Jail, Says Former Intelligence Official," *The National*," January 21, 2014, http://www.thenational.ae/world/syria/assad-regime-set-free-extremists-from-prison-to-fire-up-trouble-during-peaceful-uprising.

[294] Lund, *Syria's Ahrar al Sham Leadership Wiped Out in Bombing* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56581; Herve Bar, "Ahrar al-Sham Jihadists Emerge from the Shadows in North Syria," *Agence France Presse*, February 13, 2013, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Feb-13/206284-ahrar-al-sham-jihadists-emerge-from-shadows-in-north-syria.ashx; Chris Zambelis, "Ahrar al-Sham: A Profile of Northern Syria's al-Qaeda Surrogate," *Terrorism Monitor* 7, vol. 11 (April 2013), http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40695#.VOkHDsarZl8.
[295] Lund, *Syria's Ahrar al Sham Leadership Wiped Out in Bombing*.

al Haq, Hassan Abboud of Ahrar, and Ahmad Aisa al Sheikh of Suqur Al Sham.[296] The pre-existing ties of Ahrar's leadership in Sednaya were the foundation for agency and trust and greatly facilitated not only its emergence but also its expansion.

JAN benefited from Sednaya and other pre-existing networks in a similar fashion. According to Radwan Mortada, in mid-2011, Samir Abed Hamad al-Obeidi al-Dulaimi aka Hajji Bakr who was an Iraqi senior leader in IS until his death in Syria in 2014 sent nine Syrian members of IS to Syria to establish a jihadist organization.[297] Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the leader of JAN, led the initial delegates from IS. Of note, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, one of the most prominent religious officials in JAN today, also accompanied al-Golani.[298] Al-Golani's IS crew filled his immediate leadership ranks, but according to Jennifer Cafarella, prisoners from Sednaya prison also joined his ranks as well as members of al-Qaeda that Zawahiri sent from Pakistan.[299] The mix of ex-Sednaya prisoners, battle-hardened Syrian members of IS, and global terrorists from al-Qaeda propelled JAN to the forefront of the opposition almost immediately from a leadership and experience perspective. It also shows the overlap of local, regional, and global radical Islamist networks.

While IS also capitalized on Sednaya for leadership, especially in Raqqa and Aleppo, Camp Bucca was one of its most important mobilizing structures. According to Barrett, nine of IS's senior leaders spent time in Camp Bucca to include the head of IS Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, aka Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[300] While in Camp Bucca, IS leaders formed a bond with ex-Baathist military officers who had limited opportunity

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[296] Lund, *The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support*; Sands, Vela, and Maayeh, "Assad Regime Released Extremists from Jail;" Jennifer Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014), 19, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/jabhat-al-nusra-syria.

[297] Radwan Mortada, "al-Qaeda in Syria: From Foundation to Fracture," *al-Akhbar*, June 3, 2014, http://english.al-akhbar.com/print/20017; Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 12.

[298] Mortada, "al-Qaeda in Syria: From Foundation to Fracture."

[299] Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria*, 25 and Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 12.

[300] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 20.

for social mobility and absorbed them into their organizational structure.[301] Currently, many of IS's most senior leaders were ex-Baathists to include Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's deputies: Fadil Ahmad Abdallah al-Hayyali, aka Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, who is in charge of operations in Iraq and Abu Ali al-Ansari who is in charge of operations in Syria.[302] Additionally, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has the ex-Baathists to thank for his appointment as the head of IS. According to Barrett, Hajji Bakr, an ex-Colonel in the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard who was al-Baghdadi's former deputy and also a former prisoner in Camp Bucca, was instrumental in al-Baghdadi's selection as the leader of IS after coalition forces killed IS's two former leaders Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri in 2010. The combination of ties from Camp Bucca and the ex-Baathist military experience gave IS a significant competitive advantage over any secular opposition group in Syria.

Aside from tapping into preexisting leadership pools, Ahrar, JAN, and IS also leveraged local, regional, and global networks for manpower. Of the three groups, Ahrar is the most inclusive of local Salafi groups and benefited tremendously from "bloc recruitment." According to Mohammed Hafez, bloc recruitment is a situation when "once a few individuals make a commitment to a cause, it is difficult for those around them to stay behind."[303] For example, in early 2012, most Syrian activists considered Salafi groups to be on the fringes of the opposition.[304] The more al-Assad tried to portray the opposition as being led by radical Islamists, the less the opposition wanted to work with the Salafi groups. Applying a lesson from Abu Musab al-Suri's writings on the necessity of uniting like-minded groups, Ahrar's leadership sought to be the glue connecting them all. Between mid to late 2012, Ahrar began calling for a Salafi unification, and in early 2013, Ahrar's leadership was instrumental in forming the first Salafi alliance of 11 Islamist groups called the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), which became

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[301] Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html?_r=0.

[302] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 28.

[303] Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq*, 23.

[304] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 32.

one of the largest and most powerful factions in the opposition.[305] Promptly following the formation of the SIF, Ahrar absorbed three of the groups: *Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya* from Aleppo*, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya* from Idlib*, and Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatilla* from Damascus. Regardless of whether all the members of the aforementioned groups agreed with Ahrar's ideological position, once their leadership agreed to merge, the fighters went with them. Furthermore, the three groups are from different regions. The geographic spread facilitated Ahrar's mobilizing potential. In late 2013, Ahrar pushed to dissolve the SIF and created a new alliance called the Islamic Front (IF), which included the remainder of Syria's capable Islamist factions that previously allied with the secular opposition. The Islamic Front immediately surpassed the SIF in size and became the most powerful insurgent bloc; the total number of fighters is rumored to be between 45,000 to 70,000, which is most likely exaggerated for propaganda purposes.[306]

While JAN is not as inclusive as Ahrar, it uses similar methods. According to Cafarella, JAN takes a vanguard approach to the Syrian conflict, which is reminiscent of Hadid's strategy.[307] For its vetted members, JAN keeps its numbers lean at 5,000 to 6,000 to ensure the quality and discipline of its fighters and its brand. Regarding other Islamist and opposition groups, JAN carefully fosters good relationships using a tier system described by Cafarella.[308] For Islamist groups such as Ahrar and Jabhat Ansar al-Din among others that are ideologically aligned with JAN, the leadership of JAN places them in a tier one category. JAN cooperates closely with them and makes no attempt to dominate or take them over by hostile merger as IS does. Moderate Islamist groups are placed in a tier two category, and JAN conducts joint humanitarian and governance efforts with them as well as provides logistical support for attacks. In this manner, JAN identifies tier two groups with potential for tier one status and works to strengthen the relationship. JAN places other elements in the Syrian opposition such as the FSA in a tier 3 status. JAN provides logistical and operational support to maintain good relations.

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[305] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 3.

[306] Aron Lund, *The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support.*

[307] Cafarella, *Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria*, 25.

[308] Ibid., 15–20.

Thus, JAN leverages local networks throughout Syria for manpower without bloating its ranks. JAN's strategy has been widely successful and is why many groups in the opposition view JAN so favorably.

For manpower, IS relies on its global image for recruitment. Through its magazine *Dabiq*, it portrays itself as a utopian Islamic society for all disenchanted Muslims around the world, and based on the exceptionally high number of foreign fighters in its ranks, its recruitment campaigns are successful. According to Barrett, 15,000 foreign fighters have joined IS since 2011.[309] To place that statistic in historical perspective, IS has recruited more foreign fighters than both Afghanistan in the 1980s and Iraq in the mid-2000s combined.[310] Aside from foreigners, IS has taken over local tribes and strong-armed any group in its territory. While their loyalties are questionable, they have added to IS's growth. Regardless, without the presence of foreign fighters, scholars such as Barrett have asserted that IS would not be able to maintain its momentum.[311] Ahrar and JAN also benefited from foreign fighters but not on the level as IS.

From the standpoint of repertoires of contention, the mobilizing structures for leadership and manpower brought new innovative tactics that complimented each group's existing repertoires. For example, Ahrar has the advantage of numbers. It represents one of the largest groups in the entire opposition, which has emboldened it to partake in large-scale attacks that radical Islamist groups typically avoid. In February 2013, Ahrar overran an air base in Aleppo, and in December 2014, Ahrar with support from JAN captured two Syrian army bases in Idlib province.[312] According to *al Jazeera*, an assortment of heavy

[309] Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 16.

[310] "It Ain't Half Hot Here, Mum," *The Economist*, August 30, 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21614226-why-and-how-westerners-go-fight-syria-and-iraq-it-aint-half-hot-here-mum.

[311] Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 16.

[312] "Syrian Rebels 'Capture Air Base in Aleppo," *al Jazeera*, February 12, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/02/201321214119606560.html; "Syria Rebels Capture Key Idlib Army Bases," *al Jazeera*, December 15, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/syria-rebels-capture-key-idlib-army-bases-20141215124811678445.html.

weapons was used in the attacks. Both of these examples indicate a more professionalized fighting force.

As evident from the examples above, JAN also engages in large-scale attacks with its first tier allies. In addition, it is prolific in its use of suicide bombers, and through a deliberate and unique media strategy that Abu Musab al-Suri would endorse, JAN carefully packages its results to the outside world to preserve its relatively low profile. For example, according to the International Crisis Group, JAN prefers a slow release of its operations by reporting the results days after operations take place.[313] JAN's official statements often cover several attacks in different regions, and any documentation of the attacks is released on jihadi web forums first to prove its authenticity.[314] JAN's web followers then repost the material to social media sites. The strategy of JAN's delayed media announcements is not immediately obvious, but it serves a purpose. Groups like IS and other fast-paced elements in the opposition have built reputations on their momentum. They attack, attack, attack. JAN, on the other hand, operates at its own pace and strikes when it decides the time is right. JAN does not have the burdensome problem of constantly maintaining a high operations tempo to maintain its credibility.

Of all three groups, IS's new tactics are the most surprising. In 2010, IS (then ISI) was a terrorist group masquerading as a state. When it changed its name from AQI to ISI, its attempt to rebrand itself fooled no one. The then-ISI was still the same struggling terrorist group known for guerilla, hit and run style tactics mixed with suicide attacks on sectarian targets. However, the infusion of military expertise from the ex-Baathist military officers such as IS's senior leader Abu Muslim al-Turkmani who was reportedly a former lieutenant colonel in the Iraqi Special Forces before the war dramatically altered IS's repertoires.[315] In 2014 when IS took over Raqqa, Syria and later Mosul, Iraq, it showcased its ability to lay siege to entire cities through command and control of its forces that seemed to be following a scheme of maneuver. According to Barrett, IS

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[313] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 13.

[314] Ibid.

[315] Ruth Sherlock, "Inside the Leadership of the Islamic State: How the New 'Caliphate' is Run," *The Telegraph*, July 9, 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10956280/Inside-the-leadership-of-Islamic-State-how-the-new-caliphate-is-run.html.

employs a strategy that combines terrorism with insurgency and conventional military operations.[316] IS typically begins its assaults with a series of strategically placed suicide bombings. Then, it tries to infiltrate the local population and steadily gain control of specific areas.[317] Lastly, it unleashes a full frontal assault. This approach indicates a significant transformation from its previous tactics.

C. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I demonstrated how the remnants of earlier struggles from three key time periods facilitated the mobilization and rise of Syria's leading radical Islamist groups. The first time period produced Syria's first modern jihadist leader Marwan Hadid who permanently altered the way radical Islamists fight the Syrian regime. His tactics and strategies were groundbreaking, and his efforts linked Syria's local conflict to regional networks. The second period witnessed the maturation of Syria's most important radical ideologue and practitioner Abu Musab al-Suri and solidified the link between Syria's radical Islamists and the shadowy transnational networks of the global jihad movement. These networks not only enabled the survival of the Syrian radical Islamist cause but also provided a global platform to hone battlefield tactics and operational strategies. The third time period produced an organic logistical network inside Syria and formed the bulk of the mobilizing structures Ahrar, JAN, and IS leveraged for leadership and manpower, which also generated new repertoires.

Despite having access to the same institutional legacies, Ahrar, JAN, and IS deliberately incorporated different elements into their insurgent strategies. All three use different variations of Hadid's sectarian platform with Ahrar being moderate compared to IS. Also, all admittedly use different aspects of al-Suri's writings by placing more emphasis in certain areas. For example, fostering positive relations with other groups and local citizens is a high priority for Ahrar and JAN while it is not for IS, which prefers to indiscriminately impose its will. All three use the same general mobilizing structures stemming from the Iraq war, but each group employs its fighters in different capacities.

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316 Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 36.

317 Ibid.

The cumulative effect is Syria's leading radical Islamist groups are highly dynamic and constantly innovating. Their institutional legacies are directly correlated with how they mobilize and fight and are part of the reason for the success and rise of Ahrar, JAN, and IS in the Syrian conflict.

Conspicuously absent from this chapter is the question of resources. The same local, regional, and global networks facilitated the dispersal of money and weapons, but the bulk of it comes from external state and non-state actors in the Gulf region. While it overlaps some with Syria's radical Islamist movement, it is a distinct element, and the complexities of it deserve its own separate chapter.

V. THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL SPONSORS

Two prominent themes undeniably occurred in the evolution of the Syrian conflict. First, sectarianism became more pronounced as the conflict became more violent. Second, as the conflict went on, Islamist groups in the opposition grew disproportionately to their secular counterparts. What external factors fueled the rise of the Islamists, and how did these factors affect Syria's internal sectarian dynamic? In the previous chapters, I showed how the al-Assad regime intentionally stoked sectarian divides. I also illustrated how the institutional legacies of Syria's radical Islamist groups gave them an advantage in leadership, manpower, and tactics, but materiel and financial resources are equally crucial components to initiate and sustain collective action. For Syria's opposition movement, resources have been indelibly linked with outside involvement, which provides the next and final piece of the puzzle.

Many scholars have indicated that donations from the Gulf countries at the state and non-state levels have strengthened radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict.[318] However, beyond making generic statements, few have identified exactly how.[319] Furthermore, few have provided comprehensive comparisons of the different types of Gulf support and how each type compliments or diverges from the other. Part of the reason why this gap exists is due to the paucity of primary sources. The majority of the literature available is reports from various news outlets that are difficult to validate. Thus, caution needs to be exercised in the analysis. Second, the continual shifts in alliances in the Syrian conflict and the multitude of donors make it challenging to link one group to exclusively one donor. Still, enough literature has been written, especially between 2011 and 2013, to begin exploring the depth of donor support.

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[318] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 10.

[319] William McCants, Thomas Pierret, and Elizabeth Dickinson are among the scholars that have addressed the affects Gulf sponsorship have had on the Syrian opposition; however, each provided varying degrees of specificity. Also, none comprehensively compared the sponsorship of different countries. Dickinson's chronicle of private Kuwaiti donors titled *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home* is the most detailed study to date on any Gulf sponsor.

In this chapter, I fill the gap based on the literature available by examining how external Sunni sponsors have shaped the Syrian conflict and how they directly and indirectly facilitated the rise of radical Islamist groups. I assert that while geostrategic politics of the region incentivized sectarian identities, Gulf donors at the state and non-state levels disproportionately favored radical Islamist groups in the Syrian opposition. This chapter consists of three sections. First, I review the existing literature on external sponsors in insurgencies and civil wars. Second, I examine the Syrian conflict from a regional perspective to show how and why the Saudi–Iranian rivalry polarized sectarian identities in Syria. Third, I analyze the public and private support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait and the corresponding effects their sponsorship had on the opposition as a whole. I will also specify how these factors facilitated the rise and growth of Ahrar, JAN, and IS.

A. SPONSORS IN CIVIL WARS AND INSURGENCIES: AN OVERVIEW

Social movement, insurgency, and civil war scholars agree on the negative impact external sponsors with differing agendas have on insurgencies and civil wars. When insurgent groups compete for external sponsorship, they often align their goals with those of the donor and use the resources in a manner consistent with the donor's desires.[320] If they do not, the groups risk losing valuable support. Without materiel and financial resources, collective action cannot be sustained, and groups cannot survive. Thus, external sponsors influence group behavior, such as ideology, strategy, and tactics, and the local causes of the conflict become intertwined with outside interests.

External sponsors also cause group fragmentation.[321] Insurgency groups with access to foreign resources have little incentive to unite with other factions. This dynamic leads to competition between groups in the same opposition movement, which undermines any semblance of command and control. In addition to promoting factionalism, foreign support in civil wars leads to longer and more violent conflicts with

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[320] McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, 55.

[321] Wendy Pearlman, "Understanding Fragmentation in the Syrian Revolt," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: The Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 41, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

more fatalities.[322] One reason for this is that foreign support reduces the likelihood of peaceful negotiation since foreign donors have the luxury of not bearing the burden of violent conflict directly. This is why David Cunningham refers to them as veto players in conflict resolution.[323]

Another common hazard of external sponsors is that they cannot guarantee control of their proxies as witnessed in the violent civil wars of Afghanistan and Lebanon.[324] Groups are more likely to embellish details of operations or falsify atrocities to argue for more support. Additionally, a sponsor may lose control of a proxy when the group diversifies its sources of revenue and is no longer reliant on the sponsor for key resources.[325] For example, IS has created multiple streams of revenue and does not need sponsors to sustain its activities.[326] Thus, if IS's early sponsors applied some degree of restraint on the group's activities, IS was free to commit violent action as it saw fit once it became independent of the support that initially helped create it.

Aside from the general concepts discussed above, dissecting the different types of sponsors and their support is vital for understanding external involvement in conflicts. Daniel Byman et al. have identified the following types of external support for insurgencies: state, diaspora, refugee, religious organizations, and wealthy individuals, among others.[327] Generally, state support is regarded as the most important form, but in Syria, the combination of diaspora communities, religious organizations, and wealthy individuals has proven more valuable than state, especially since private donors are extremely difficult to track and hold accountable. Regardless, both state and private support have been instrumental in shaping the Syrian uprising.

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[322] Christia, "What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict," 10; Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[323] Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War in Syria," 26.

[324] Staniland, "Insurgent Organization and State-Armed Group Relations," 38.

[325] Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2004), 268.

[326] Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 45.

[327] Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 3, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1405 html.

The scope of outside support varies considerably from critical to minor. Financial resources, political support, direct military support, and safe havens are the most critical forms.[328] Valuable and minor forms consist of training, weapons and materiel, fighters, intelligence, organizational aid, and ideological inspiration.[329] There are no shortages of safe havens in Syria, and aside from targeted air strikes against IS and JAN, there is no direct, large-scale military involvement from outside forces. Most prefer to let their proxies represent their interests. As a result, direct financial support and military weapons are the most critical needs for the Syrian opposition.

There are three primary reasons why sponsors provide external support. According to Abdulkader Sinno, the top motivations are to weaken the targeted government, extend regional influence, and support ideological, ethnic, or religious kin.[330] The first two motivations are normally linked with a desire to control a proxy to ensure maximum results. To increase the likelihood of control, the sponsor needs the proxy to have a centralized leadership.[331] Therefore, sponsors with the most ambitious motivations theoretically should prefer to support proxies that are hierarchical and demonstrate command and control of its forces.

In Syria, Islamist groups, both radical and moderate, have received more external support than secular elements in the opposition, which explains why they are often better equipped and financed.[332] To analyze why and how, I utilize all the elements discussed in this section in the remainder of this chapter. Beginning with macro-level factors, specifically the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, the next section explores the impact of transnational identities on the Syrian conflict.

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[328] Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*, 84–91.

[329] Ibid., 92–99.

[330] Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*, 79.

[331] Ibid., 79.

[332] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 32.

B.   THE SAUDI–IRANIAN RIVALRY AND THE SYRIAN CONNECTION

According to Curtis Ryan, Syria represents "the new Arab Cold War," which is a historical reference to inter-Arab power struggles from the 1950s and 1960s where identity and ideological differences were challenged through proxy wars.[333]   The 21st century witnessed three traditional centers of power in the Middle East: Egypt, Iraq, and Syria greatly diminish in prominence while other regional players surged to the forefront, namely Saudi Arabia and Iran.[334]   Both are engaged in a Cold War like rivalry that contains a strong religious and ideological element pitting Sunni against Shia. The Arab Spring raised their interstate competition to new heights, and Syria has become the epicenter of their rivalry. Examining the Saudi–Iranian rivalry and linking it to Syria provides an initial reference point to begin analyzing the role and motivations of external sponsors in the Syrian conflict.

While both Saudi Arabia and Iran are Islamic countries, they represent opposite ends of the spectrum. Saudi Arabia is the regional leader for Sunni Muslims. It espouses an ultra-conservative form of Islam known as Wahhabism, which is essentially the Saudi form of Salafism.[335]   It is named after its founder Muhammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab who lived during the 18th century.[336]   Saudi Arabia aggressively exports its Wahhabi ideology throughout the region. While Wahhabism is not inherently violent, its fundamentalist approach to Islam is at times controversial and generally hostile towards Shia Muslims.[337]   From a foreign policy perspective, Saudi Arabia is a U.S. ally focused on preserving the status quo in the region.[338]   As an absolute monarchy, it abhors change and often uses revenues from its vast oil reserves to coopt potential adversaries, which formed the basis of the Saudi strategy inside the Kingdom in the wake of the Arab

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[333] Curtis, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria."

[334] Ibid.

[335] W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi–Iranian Rivalry and the Future of Middle East Security* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 3.

[336] Ahmad Moussalli, *Wahhabism, Salafism, and Islamism: Who is the Enemy* (London, England: Conflicts Forum, 2009), 4, http://www.conflictsforum.org/2009/wahhabism-salafism-and-islamism/.

[337] Ibid., 6.

[338] Terrill, *The Saudi–Iranian Rivalry*, 1.

Spring.[339] Essentially, it bribed its local populace to reduce political discontent through generous government subsidies.

As the leading non-Arab, non-Sunni country in the region, Iran is the de-facto leader of Shi'ites around the world. Many countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Kuwait, contain sizeable Shia communities who have faced ongoing problems with discrimination, poverty, and unemployment, especially in the Gulf region. As a result, Iran sees itself as their benefactor to varying degrees, which causes friction particularly in the Gulf countries. However, sectarian distinctions are not the only reason for Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia; political differences are just as, if not more, important.

The origins of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry trace back to the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979.[340] During the revolution, Iranian citizens led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini overthrew their monarch Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and established an Islamic Republic. The event was cataclysmic in the region as Iranian revolutionaries promptly called for the overthrow of the Gulf monarchies and the establishment of Islamic Republics in their stead.

Saudi Arabia was one of the first to feel the reverberations. In late 1979, Saudi's Shia community in its Eastern Province rioted while carrying pictures of Khomeini and denouncing the Saudi monarchy.[341] The Saudi government violently squashed the unrest and blamed Iran for its inception, despite the long history of Saudi political repression against the Shia community. Khomeini responded with a steady stream of vitriol directed at the Saudi monarchy and consistently questioned its legitimacy to rule.

Once the Iran–Iraq War began in 1980, Saudi Arabia firmly backed Iraq and rallied financial support from the other Sunni Gulf monarchies. Within the region, Syria was the only Arab state to provide diplomatic and moral support on the Iranian side,

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[339] Terrill, *The Saudi–Iranian Rivalry*, 30.

[340] Ibid., 5.

[341] Ibid.

which marked the beginning of the alliance today.[342]   While the Sunni–Shia split of the alliances is impossible to ignore, the dynamic cannot be reduced to sectarian loyalties alone. For example, many assume that Hafez al-Assad and his Alawite inner circle naturally sided with Iran because of the Shia connection; however, al-Assad was arguably motivated to side with Iran more out of hatred towards Iraq than to sectarian loyalties.[343] Different branches of the Baath Party led the governments in both Syria and Iraq at the time, and both were bitter rivals. Their animosity was political, not sectarian. Regardless of the nuances, violent conflicts in the region tend to amplify sectarian differences, and sectarianism becomes a powerful tool to rally support.

In reaction to the Iranian Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War, Saudi Arabia consolidated its regional leadership in 1981 by forming the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a regional alliance of Gulf Arab monarchies from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.[344]   The headquarters of the GCC is in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and its purpose was to unite the interests of the Gulf monarchies in the face of regional turmoil.[345]   Currently, the GCC is the primary, regional political instrument through which the Saudi government attempts to maintain the status quo.

Although the Saudi–Iranian rivalry has ebbed and flowed since the 1980s, it has never resulted in a direct military confrontation and probably never will.[346]   Rather, the rivalry is played out in the domestic politics of weak neighboring states through proxies.[347]   The Saudi–Iranian dueling sectarian narratives represent their most potent weapon, not military power, and since 2000, Iran appears to be gaining the upper hand. Its political influence has expanded while Saudi Arabia continually tries to keep it in check. For example, Iran's most important non-state ally Hizbullah is a dominant force in

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[342] Terrill, *The Saudi–Iranian Rivalry*, 27.

[343] Ibid., 27.

[344] Ibid., 2.

[345] Ibid., 14.

[346] F. Gregory Gause, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014), 3.

[347] Ibid.

Lebanese politics, and since the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, Iranian influence within Iraq's current Shia government has increased.[348]

When the Arab Spring erupted in late 2010, the Saudi and Iranian responses fell in line with their established track records. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was quick to portray the Arab Spring as an extension of Iran's 1979 Revolution and welcomed the change.[349] Conversely, Saudi leaders were horrified as Hosni Mubarak's regime was toppled in Egypt, and Saudi's responses to the Arab Spring gradually escalated from passive to active support. When protests began in Libya, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries, especially Qatar, sent materiel and financial support to the Libyan opposition. However, when Bahrain's Shia majority population began protesting in 2011, the Saudi government took a more proactive stance and sent 1,000 soldiers at the behest of the Bahraini Sunni royal family to help suppress the protests.[350] Immediately following the crackdown, the Bahraini king publicly accused Iran and Hizbullah of fomenting civil unrest, which Iran promptly denied.[351] However, the protests in Syria raised the stakes of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry considerably as their differing interests collided.

Syria is Iran's most important ally at the state level while Hizbullah is Iran's most important non-state ally. For all intents and purposes, Syria represents Iran's land bridge to Hizbullah. Syria is also a vital, strategic buffer separating Iran from its mortal enemy, Israel. Aside from the Syrian regime, Iran undoubtedly has the most to lose if Bashar al-Assad is ousted and replaced by a hostile Sunni government.

When the Syrian uprising began to spread, Iran started sending riot-control equipment and advisors with expertise in breaking up anti-government protests.[352] As the conflict expanded in 2012, Iran stepped up its shipment of military supplies to the

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348 "The Long Arm," *The Economist*, January 24, 2015, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21640382-iran-doing-better-its-rivals-expanding-its-influence-unstable.

349 Terrill, *The Saudi–Iranian Rivalry*, 11–12.

350 Ibid., 22.

351 Ibid., 23.

352 Ibid., 32.

Syrian regime and sent members from its Qods Force, the special forces unit in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to train Syrian Alawite paramilitary forces.[353] Iran and Syria also leveraged other Shia allies. According to Matthew Levitt, Hizbullah has sent as many as 5,000 of its fighters to Syria on a rotational basis, and Iraqi Shia militants from Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and Kataib Hizbullah have also sent up to 5,000 fighters.[354] While state and non-state external support from Syria's Shia allies has uniformly supported the al-Assad regime, the Syrian opposition has not had the same consistency with its benefactors.

C.   SUNNI EXTERNAL SPONSORS

Overall, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait account for the majority of all Sunni Arab materiel and financial support to the Syrian opposition as well as humanitarian aid to refugees. While it is difficult to quantify exact amounts, general trends have emerged. Saudi Arabia was a major donor from the onset of the uprising, but according to Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, between 2011 and 2013, Qatar provided the most materiel and financial support to the opposition totaling as much $3 billion.[355] Since 2013, Saudi Arabia has surpassed Qatar.[356] Despite both countries being in the GCC, they have differed greatly over the type of support they provide and to whom, which will be specified in the following sections. From a humanitarian standpoint, Kuwait is the largest provider and is opposed to arming the opposition.[357]

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[353] Michael R. Gordon, "Iran Supplying Syrian Military via Iraq Airspace," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2012, http://www nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html.

[354] Matthew Levitt, *Syria Spillover: the Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-spillover-the-growing-threat-of-terrorism-and-sectarianism-in-the-mid**.**

[355] Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, "Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms," *Financial Times*, May 16, 2013, http://www ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/86e3f28e-be3a-11e2-bb35-00144feab7de html#axzz3TfywwIzX.

[356] Mariam Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support," *Reuters*, May 31, 2013, http://www reuters.com/article/2013/05/31/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531.

[357] Elizabeth Dickinson, *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2013), 3.

A plethora of non-state entities, such as members of Syrian expatriate communities, Salafi charities, and private donors, emerged in parallel with state support to the Syrian opposition. Quantifying their contributions is even more elusive than totaling state support, but Joby Warrick estimates it to be in the range of hundreds of millions of dollars.[358] In addition to financial assistance, Salafi preachers and Muslim clerics have provided significant ideational support that is impossible to quantify. The sheer volume of state and non-state support to the Syrian conflict has been substantial. The combination of both has fundamentally altered the ideology, behavior, and organization of the opposition. Due to the complexities involved, the financial, materiel, and ideational support at both the state and non-state levels of each country will be addressed separately.

1.   Saudi Arabia: Unintended Consequences

Saudi Arabia's initial support to the Syrian opposition epitomized how the Saudi–Iranian rivalry directly affects neighboring states. Its initial motivation to back the Syrian opposition had little to do with supporting the democratic and nationalist desires of the first Syrian protestors. Rather, it aimed to facilitate the ouster of the al-Assad regime and deny Iran its key regional ally.[359] Furthermore, Saudi Arabia hoped that any new Syrian government would be Sunni and would look to it and the GCC for support, not Iran.[360] Within this context, Saudi Arabia was one the first Gulf countries to provide materiel and financial assistance to opposition forces. Its support demonstrated the destructive force foreign interference can have on a conflict.

An initial challenge the Syrian opposition faced was uniting its heterogeneous factions. With the assistance of the government of Turkey, the opposition established the Syrian National Council (SNC) in August 2011, which was the first attempt to unite the

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[358] Joby Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-donations-give-edge-to-islamists-in-syria-officials-say/2013/09/21/a6c783d2-2207-11e3-a358-1144dee636dd_story html.

[359] Curtis, "The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria."

[360] Ibid.

interests of all Syrians opposed to the al-Assad regime.[361] The SNC is based in Istanbul,
Turkey, and its initial goal was to present a united front to the international
community.[362] It consisted of a broad range of activists such as the Free Syrian Army
(FSA), democratic and secular entities that included minority groups, and moderate
Islamist groups such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB). From the onset, it was
plagued by factional infighting. This dynamic gave the SMB an initial advantage because
of all groups in the SNC, the SMB was the most organized.[363] Overall, Saudi Arabia is
staunchly opposed to any element of the Muslim Brotherhood because Saudi leaders view
the Muslim Brotherhood's version of political Islam as the most organized and capable
threat to their rule.[364] As a result, Saudi Arabia was leery of the SNC and refused to
work with the SMB. It began a pattern of backing specific groups within the SNC that
were outwardly Islamist but were aligned with Saudi interests and its Wahhabi views.
Qatar preferred the SMB to other groups, and the basis of a Saudi–Qatari rivalry in the
Syrian conflict formed as they began backing different Islamist groups.[365]

In addition to the intra-GCC discrepancies over whom to support, the process that
Saudi Arabia and Qatar initiated to deliver the materiel and financial resources in 2011
thoroughly undermined the SNC. Rather than take a hands-on approach, both countries
appointed middlemen in Turkey to distribute their support. According to Rania Abouzeid,
Saudi Arabia chose the Lebanese politician Okab Sabr who is affiliated with the former
Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri.[366] The Saudis and Hariri had a preexisting
working relationship in the region. Per Saudi guidance, Sabr identified a mix of capable
groups between the FSA and various Salafi factions, and he offered Saudi support in

[361] "Syrian Council Wants Recognition as Voice of Opposition," *Reuters*, October 10, 2011,
http://www reuters.com/article/2011/10/10/us-syria-opposition-idUSTRE7993NF20111010.

[362] "Guide to the Syrian Opposition," *BBC News*, October 17, 2013,
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15798218.

[363] Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 188–189.

[364] Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels: Who Are the Saudis and the Qataris
Arming?," *Time*, September 18, 2012, http://world.time.com/2012/09/18/syrias-secular-and-islamist-rebels-
who-are-the-saudis-and-the-qataris-arming/.

[365] Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution,"
Financial Times, May 17, 2013, http://www ft.com/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html.

[366] Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels."

exchange for pledges of loyalty.[367] From the Saudi perspective, it wanted to avoid the mistakes it made during the Soviet War in Afghanistan by providing blanket support to jihadists such as Usama bin Laden who returned to Saudi Arabia after the conflict ended and directly challenged the Saudi government, which is why it wanted the specific pledges of loyalty. Regardless of Saudi intentions, its selective support bred favoritism.

Rather than go through the SNC, groups were incentivized to adopt Saudi's agenda. They began to display outward Islamist tendencies in hopes of attracting Saudi support. They also began videotaping attacks to prove their effectiveness on the battlefield, which promoted an escalation of violence in an already vicious conflict.[368] Furthermore, the methods used to disperse the funds were highly questionable. Sabr established contacts inside Syria and entrusted them to deliver the funds to groups that were unable to send a representative to Turkey.[369] There was often no way of knowing exactly who received the money and weapons at the end of the logistics chain. Additionally, the constant changes in alliances inside Syria and the uncertainty of knowing which groups were actually Islamist or not prevented a clear assessment of how to categorize the most active elements in the Syrian opposition.

An excellent example of this predicament is the Farouq Brigade, which was the most effective fighting force in the FSA in Homs, Syria in 2011.[370] Sunni defectors from the Syrian Army formed the core of the Farouq Brigade in response to the regime's harsh tactics on the citizens of Homs. When it announced its formation, it presented a secular, nationalist agenda and appealed to all Syrians regardless of sect.[371] After Saudi and Qatari money began to flood the opposition, the Farouq Brigade slowly changed its discourse in 2012. The group switched its logo to a black flag with crossed swords commonly seen among jihadist groups.[372] Its leaders grew Salafi-style beards as they

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[367] Chris Zambelis, "Royal Rivalry in the Levant: Saudi Arabia and Qatar Duel over Syria," *Terrorism Monitor 16*, vol. XI (August 2013): 10.

[368] Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels."

[369] Ibid.

[370] Holliday, *Syria's Armed Opposition*, 19.

[371] Lund, *Syrian Jihadism,* 11.

[372] Ibid.

appealed for Gulf support.[373] According to Joseph Holliday, the new Islamist version of the Farouq Brigade proved to be highly polarizing in Homs.[374] It refused to coordinate with other opposition groups that it previously worked with and disrupted the FSA's command and control to conduct joint operations.

In 2012, the Farouq Brigade joined the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), an alliance of moderate Islamist groups.[375] Saudi Arabia generally favored the SILF over the other Salafi alliance the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), which contained Ahrar among others and had close ties to JAN.[376] Within the SILF, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar backed some of the most prominent groups, such as the Farouq Brigade, Jaish al-Islam, and al-Tawhid Brigade.[377] To Saudi annoyance, Qatar also backed groups in the SIF at the same time.[378] Adding more confusion and complexity to the matter, many of the groups in the SILF including the Farouq Brigade joined other alliances under regional military councils that were also receiving Saudi and Qatari funds. Thus, many groups learned that if they joined more alliances, they could double dip on external support.

In 2013, the SILF dissolved, and many of the groups, including Suqur al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, and al-Tawhid Brigade, joined the newly formed Salafi alliance the Islamic Front led by Ahrar.[379] The Farouq Brigade declined to join the Islamic Front alliance, which further brought its Islamist transformation into question. It is unknown whether the group actually believed in the Islamist platform or how much they were influenced by Gulf support, but the observation is impossible to dismiss. The strategic decision by the Farouq Brigade leadership to adopt an Islamist agenda coincided with

[373] Lund, *Syrian Jihadism,* 11.

[374] Joseph Holliday, *Syria's Maturing Insurgency* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2012), 27–28, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-maturing-insurgency.

[375] Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels."

[376] Zambelis, "Royal Rivalry in the Levant," 10.

[377] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Insight: Saudi Arabia Boosts Salafist Rivals to Al Qaeda in Syria," *Reuters*, October 1, 2013, http://www reuters.com/article/2013/10/01/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight-idUSBRE9900RO20131001 and Khalaf and Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution."

[378] Zambelis, "Royal Rivalry in the Levant," 10.

[379] "Syrian Rebels Form New Islamic Front," *BBC News*, November 22, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25053525.

others in the opposition who were competing for Saudi and Qatari support. Additionally, when the Farouq Brigade adopted its Islamist persona, it stopped working with others in Homs, presumably because it no longer needed to rely on others in the opposition as a result of external support. With the infusion of money and weapons, the Farouq Brigade was able to carve out its own fiefdom and had no incentive to share power with others.

In addition to demonstrating how external support can affect group ideology, the above example also reveals the unintended consequences of Saudi support as well as the fuzziness of opposition alliances. Saudi leaders backed the SILF to offset the momentum that some of the radical elements such as Ahrar were gaining through its SIF alliance. Furthermore, backing the SILF did not seem overly controversial, aside from further eroding the SNC's legitimacy, because none of the groups in the SILF were considered radical. However, when half of the groups in the SILF that received Saudi and Qatari support joined the Islamic Front alliance the following year, they became directly affiliated with Ahrar and conducted joint operations with JAN. It is reasonable to assert that both Ahrar and JAN benefited indirectly from the prior support its new allies received from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This is one reason why some in the media have accused Saudi Arabia of enabling radical Islamist groups, but there is no direct evidence that the Saudi government intended to do so.[380]

Overall, Saudi's materiel and financial support to the opposition was opportunistic and contrary to the initial goals of the uprising. From the Saudi perspective, backing numerous individual groups increased the likelihood of Saudi influence in a post-conflict government. However, its middlemen did not seem to enact any safeguards to ensure Saudi money was not going to radical groups. The lack of self-correction despite all the warning signs is astounding to the outside observer. By late 2013, the variance between Saudi and Qatari support to the opposition was drastic. The international community grew increasingly alarmed by the rise of radical Islamist groups and

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[380] Lori Plotkin Boghardt, *Saudi Funding of ISIS* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis.

pressured the Saudi government to centralize all Gulf funding.[381] Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed, but the damage was irreparable.

At the non-state level, Saudi Arabia has been the most proactive of the GCC countries in curbing support from private, wealthy donors. It made private fundraising outside of official state channels illegal and banned its citizens from traveling to Syria to wage jihad.[382] Regardless, private citizens that want to donate to the conflict simply redirect their funds to other countries with lax financial laws such as Kuwait. Also, Saudi citizens that want to wage jihad in Syria seem to do so unencumbered. According to the website the *Middle East Monitor*, 7,000 Saudis have joined IS.[383] Others such as the Soufan Group placed the number at 2,500.[384] While each of the sources have different figures, both agree that Saudis comprise the largest non-Syrian contingent of fighters in the Syrian conflict, and most have joined IS.

While Saudi Arabia has not directly backed radical Islamist groups, one of the most important supporters of Ahrar and the Islamic Front alliance resides in the Kingdom. Adnan al-Arur, a firebrand Salafi televangelist originally from Hama, emerged as a key ideational figure in the Syrian conflict due to his strong sectarian discourse and theatrical style in his weekly talk show aired by several Salafi affiliated channels.[385] Prior to the Syrian uprising, al-Arur had a small following. However, once hostilities erupted, his narrative and demands for armed insurrection against the al-Assad regime

[381] Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support."

[382] Robert F. Worth, "Saudis Back Syrian Rebels Despite Risks," *The New York Times*, January 7, 2014, http://www nytimes.com/2014/01/08/world/middleeast/saudis-back-syria-rebels-despite-a-lack-of-control.html; Joby Warrick, "Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Sides," *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-money-pours-into-syrian-conflict-as-rich-donors-pick-sides/2013/06/15/67841656-cf8a-11e2-8845-d970ccb04497_story html.

[383] "Saudis Most Likely to Join ISIS, 10% of Group's Fighters Are Women," *Middle East Monitor*, October 20, 2014, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/14758-saudis-most-likely-to-join-isis-10-of-groups-fighters-are-women.

[384] Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in* Syria, 13.

[385] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 29.

transformed his show into one of the most popular in Syria among rebel fighters.[386] He is known to criticize non-Salafi factions and once infamously "vowed to grind the flesh of pro-regime Alawites and feed it to the dogs."[387] While he has recently tried to reduce his anti-Alawite and anti-Shia rhetoric, his popularity undoubtedly adds to sectarian divides. Al-Arur formally backs a variety of opposition groups, but according to Lund, Lister, and Zelin, he is one of the most prominent publicly known donors at the private level based in Saudi Arabia to Ahrar and the Islamic Front alliance.[388]

2. Qatar: Sponsorship Gone Awry

When the Arab Spring began, Qatar, unlike Saudi Arabia, ambitiously embraced the changing environment. It viewed the uprisings as an opportunity to expand its regional influence and had no reservation about breaking ranks with its GCC counterparts, especially Saudi Arabia.[389] For example, in Egypt, Qatar backed the Muslim Brotherhood while the Saudi government did not. In Libya, Qatar asserted itself as the most aggressive GCC country in providing weapons to rebel forces.[390] However, Qatar's Libyan support later became controversial when radical Islamists left the Qatari sponsored, relatively Western-friendly group Rafallah al-Sehati and formed the radical group Ansar al-Shariah that participated in the 2012 Benghazi attack, which resulted in the death of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens.[391] When the Syrian uprising began, Qatar reacted cautiously, like many others in the region, but as the violence increased in 2011, Qatar quickly became one of the most prolific opposition benefactors

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[386] Nir Rosen, "Islamism and the Syrian Uprising," *Foreign Policy Blogs*, March 8, 2012, http://mideastafrica foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism_and_the_syrian_uprising; "The Charm of Telesalafism," *The Economist*, October 20, 2012, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21564913-influential-rebel-preacher-who-needs-tone-things-down.

[387] "The Charm of Telesalafism," *The Economist*.

[388] *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 29; Zelin and Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front;" Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 29.

[389] Zambelis, "Royal Rivalry in the Levant," 11.

[390] David D. Kirkpatrick, "Qatar's Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2014, http://www nytimes.com/2014/09/08/world/middleeast/qatars-support-of-extremists-alienates-allies-near-and-far html.

[391] Ibid.

of not only materiel and financial support but also humanitarian aid to refugees. Despite Qatar's generosity, its sponsorship has been more controversial and divisive than Saudi's.

Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar began financing and arming opposition elements in 2011 after the SNC was formed. Qatar used a similar process as the Saudis. It dispersed funds through its own middlemen in Turkey but differed with the Saudis on the recipients. For example, Qatar supported the SMB and its affiliated Islamist groups, but its decision to do so was more pragmatic than ideological.[392] While funding the SMB ran counter to Saudi's interests, Qatar recognized that the SMB was the most organized in the SNC and seemed to have established contacts inside Syria, which theoretically increased the likelihood of funding being delivered to local elements fighting the regime. Simultaneous to its SMB support, Qatar also provided funding to the regional military commands in the SNC to distribute inside Syria as well. Qatar did so to minimize favoritism, but their efforts led to more complications. In order to receive Qatari funding, groups under the regional commands had to submit lists of personnel to justify the quantity of funding. According to Rania Abouzeid, groups began inflating their numbers, which led to a different type of internal competition and muddled accurate assessments of the opposition's strength.[393] Furthermore, groups under the SMB's and the regional command's purview received double Qatari funding than those that did not, which encouraged groups to adopt Islamist agendas.

Regardless, in 2012, Qatar appeared to abandon concerns of favoritism and drastically expanded its support to individual groups. Just as Saudi Arabia sought to hedge its position with potential winners in the conflict, Qatar did as well to increase the chances of having multiple points of influence within a new Syrian government. The difference is Qatar controversially provided extensive support to numerous Islamist groups, whether radical or not. However, it is exceptionally difficult to prove that the Qataris funded specific groups exclusively. Most were opportunistically obtaining support from Qatar as well as many other donors, but given the scope of the billions of

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[392] Abouzeid, "Syria's Secular and Islamist Rebels."

[393] Ibid.

dollars Qatar provided between 2011 and 2013, it is a safe to assume that Qatar's support was more influential than lesser donors.

In 2012, Qatar's fingerprint appeared on many Islamist groups. The transformation of the al-Tawhid Brigade provides an interesting example. The group formed in mid-2012 when a number of smaller Islamist groups affiliated with the SMB merged at the behest of Turkey.[394] The groups previously received financing from Qatar via the SMB.[395] When the SILF formed in 2012 as a moderate Islamist alliance, the al-Tawhid Brigade joined and collaborated with other moderate Islamist groups who also received funding from Qatar such as the Farouq Brigade.[396] Meanwhile, Qatar was also providing direct support to Ahrar.[397] When the SILF dissolved in 2013, the al-Tawhid Brigade and other prominent groups in the alliance joined Ahrar and other Salafi groups in the Islamic Front. Scholars such as Zelin and Lister have asserted that the evolution of Islamist alliances, such as the SILF, SIF, and now the Islamic Front, is the result of Qatari efforts to portray a more organized Islamist opposition.[398] The dilemma is that it merged moderate elements with more radical Salafi factions, and the public statements and visible expressions of the al-Tawhid Brigade are evidence of the effects.

The al-Tawhid Brigade transitioned from a moderate Islamist group whose fighters donned white headbands commonly seen with SMB affiliates to wearing black headbands normally worn by jihadists in extremist groups.[399] Additionally, aside from being in an alliance with Ahrar, the al-Tawhid Brigade also began conducting joint attacks with JAN in 2013. Their relationship has progressed far enough that JAN has

[394] "The Story of Al-Tawhid Brigade: Fighting for Sharia," *Al-Monitor*, October 22, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/10/syria-opposition-islamists-tawhid-brigade html.

[395] Ibid.

[396] Khalaf and Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution."

[397] David Blair and Richard Spencer, "How Qatar Is Funding the Rise of Islamist Extremists," *The Telegraph*, September 20, 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/11110931/How-Qatar-is-funding-the-rise-of-Islamist-extremists.html.

[398] Zelin and Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front."

[399] "The Story of Al-Tawhid Brigade," *Al-Monitor*.

allowed its fighters to fight under al-Tawhid leadership for large-scale attacks.[400] While the example traces the metamorphosis of al-Tawhid, it also shows how Qatar's funding is being leveraged indirectly by JAN. Given that Qatar supported Ahrar and al-Tawhid as well as other groups considered tier one level allies with JAN, it is inevitable that Qatari funding and weapons are being used by JAN and other radical extremists.[401]

In 2013, Qatar began to change its policies of supporting the opposition for a variety of reasons. First, accusations that Qatar was reckless with its funding grew louder and louder from the international community. Aside from charges that Qatar was facilitating the rise of radical groups and encouraging others to adopt more Islamist platforms, Qatar also walked a dangerous line with weapons. In 2012, the Obama administration directed all Arab allies not to provide heat-seeking shoulder-fire missiles known as man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to the Syrian opposition.[402] Understandably, the United States did not want the weapons to end up in radical Islamist hands. In defiance of the United States, Qatar provided a limited quantity of Chinese-made FN-6 MANPADS to unspecified FSA-affiliated groups.[403] Videos emerged online soon after depicting FSA groups using the FN-6s to the dismay of Western officials.[404] While there are no indications that Qatar gave FN-6s to Islamist groups, the above event added to international alarm at Qatari support.

Second, the Saudi–Qatari rivalry reached a boiling point in April 2013 when Qatari-backed rebel forces abandoned their post during the siege of the Wadi al-Deif military base.[405] Their retreat enabled regime forces to escape and mount a counterattack that resulted in numerous opposition deaths.[406] An after-action report revealed that the

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[400] "The Story of Al-Tawhid Brigade," *Al-Monitor*.

[401] Mark Mazzetti, C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Taking Outsize Role in Syria, Qatar Funnels Arms to Rebels," *The New York Times*, June 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/sending-missiles-to-syrian-rebels-qatar-muscles-in html.

[402] Ibid.

[403] Ibid.

[404] Mazzetti et al., "Taking Outsize Role in Syria."

[405] Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support."

[406] Ibid.

commander of the Qatari-backed forces was pocketing the funds from Qatar and left his fighters vulnerable. The international community expressed outrage over the lack of accountability of Qatari support. Reporter Mariam Karouny cited the incident as the "final straw" for Saudi Arabia and Qatar to centralize their support.[407] Third, while other political factors were at play, a change in Qatari leadership facilitated shifts in foreign policy. In mid-2013, the ruling Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani stepped down and peacefully handed power to his son Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. According to Khaled Yacoub Oweis, Sheikh Tamim wanted to reduce Qatar's enhanced regional profile since the Arab Spring began.[408] A combination of the above reasons led Qatar to reassess its Syrian position and fall in line with Saudi Arabia.[409] While their coordinated assistance should facilitate more effective external support, the damage that both did between 2011 and 2013 by backing different opposition groups is irreversible.

Due to international pressure, Qatar ended its overt support of Ahrar in 2013.[410] However, Amena Bakr reported that Qatar has continued its support to Ahrar through the Islamic Front alliance but at reduced levels.[411] Aside from Ahrar, there is no evidence that Qatar has supported JAN or IS directly, but its private citizens have through fundraising efforts. According to the U.S. Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen, Qatar has become a "permissive terrorist financing environment" for Ahrar, JAN, and IS.[412] Cohen explained that terrorist fundraising networks based in Kuwait have representatives inside Qatar to gather donations from

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[407] Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support."

[408] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Saudi–Qatar Rivalry Divides Syrian Opposition," *Reuters*, January 15, 2014, http://www reuters.com/article/2014/01/15/us-syria-crisis-qatar-idUSBREA0E1G720140115.

[409] Karouny, "Saudi Edges Qatar to Control Syrian Rebel Support."

[410] Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say;" Spencer, "How Qatar Is Funding the Rise of Islamist Extremists."

[411] Amena Bakr, "Defying Allies, Qatar Unlikely to Abandon Favored Syria Rebels," *Reuters*, March 20, 2014, http://www reuters.com/article/2014/03/20/us-syria-crisis-qatar-idUSBREA2J0WM20140320.

[412] United States Department of the Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for a New American Security on 'Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing,'" news release, March 4, 2014, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/jl2308.aspx.

wealthy individuals.[413]   The money is then transferred to Kuwait where it is routed to radical Islamists in Syria. The Qatari government has done little to stop it.

For example, the U.S. Department of Treasury imposed sanctions on the Qatar-based al-Qaeda financier Abd al-Rahman bin Umayr al-Nuaymi in 2013. According to the Treasury Department, al-Nuaymi functioned as an intermediary between al-Qaeda and private Qatari donors.[414]   He previously transferred as much as $2 million per month to al-Qaeda in Iraq (now IS) and, most recently, transferred $600,000 in 2013 to al-Qaeda's representative in Syria Abu Khalid al-Suri who was also one of the founding members of Ahrar.[415]   Al-Nuaymi openly operates in Qatar and is a well-known academic and businessman. Despite the U.S. designation of al-Nuaymi as a terrorist financier, Qatar has yet to act against him.[416]

Another form of assistance at the private level emanating from Qatar is ideational support from popular Muslim clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi who Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Zelin refer to as "the world's most influential Sunni cleric."[417] During a rally in Qatar in May 2013, al-Qaradawi was the first Muslim cleric of celebrity status to label the Syrian conflict a legitimate jihad.[418]   He called upon any Sunni Muslim with the ability to fight to go to Syria and wage jihad against the al-Assad regime. Following his declaration, al-Qaradawi attended a conference in Cairo, Egypt in June 2013 with Egypt's most senior Muslim clerics and representatives from more than 70 Sunni organizations.[419]   After the conference, the clerics called for all forms of jihad in

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[413] United States Department of the Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen."

[414] United States Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates al-Qaeda Supporters in Qatar and Yemen," news release, December 18, 2013, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2249.aspx.

[415] Ibid.

[416] Spencer, "How Qatar Is Funding the Rise of Islamist Extremists."

[417] Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade," *Foreign Affairs*, July 7, 2013, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139557/thomas-hegghammer-aaron-y-zelin/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade.

[418] Ibid.

[419] Omar Fahmy, "Sunni Clerics Call for Jihad against Syria's Assad, Allies," *Reuters*, June 13, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/13/us-syria-crisis-sunnis-jihad-idUSBRE95C16U20130613.

Syria and encouraged those who cannot fight to send money and arms to the Syrian opposition.[420] One of the founders of Ahrar, Hassan Abboud, was the only person from the Syrian opposition present at the conference.[421] The significance of al-Qaradawi's calls for jihad, the subsequent backing from other popular Muslim clerics, and the presence of Ahrar's most publicly known leader cannot be overstated. An estimated 60 million people watch al-Qaradawi's weekly talk show on *al Jazeera*; he commands an incredibly large constituency.[422] Furthermore, the backing of other influential clerics adds more bite to his call for jihad, and the presence of Ahrar's leader Abboud at the conference puts a face on the Syrian conflict, especially after Abboud gave personal interviews to various news correspondents.[423]

While there are no statistics to quantify the impact of al-Qaradawi's declaration, labeling the Syrian conflict a jihad makes it difficult to distinguish between extreme jihadists and those who are responding to the cleric to defend their faith. While Syria was teeming with foreign fighters before al-Qaradawi's call to arms, it has since become "the largest foreign fighter destination in the history of modern Islamism," according to Hegghammer and Zelin. Furthermore, al-Qaradawi and his associates blurred the legal lines of charitable donations. It is now religiously justified to donate money for jihad, and Ahrar positioned itself to monopolize the rewards.

3.   Kuwait: The "Epicenter" of Radical Islamist Financial Support

Prior to the Arab Spring, Kuwait had a reputation as the most charity-friendly country in the GCC. Its lax financial laws, freedom of assemble, and lack of government oversight made it an ideal location for private charities to base their operations, especially in a region known for stifling political environments.[424] However, radical groups such as

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[420] Fahmy, "Sunni Clerics Call for Jihad against Syria's Assad, Allies."

[421] Zelin and Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front."

[422] David Schenker, *Qaradawi and the Struggle for Sunni Islam* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2013), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qaradawi-and-the-struggle-for-sunni-islam.

[423] Zelin and Lister, "The Crowning of the Syrian Islamic Front."

[424] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 3.

al-Qaeda have taken advantage of Kuwait's charity-friendly setting in the past. For example, in 2008, the United States blacklisted the Salafi charity the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS) in Kuwait for financially supporting al-Qaeda.[425] The RIHS still operates openly in Kuwait and was one of the first charities to begin arming Islamist groups in Syria in 2011.[426] Countless Salafi charities like the RIHS exist in Kuwait that walk a fine line between promoting fundamentalist versions of Islam through charitable works and directly supporting radical groups. Furthermore, considerable overlap exists between public and private sector participation in Kuwaiti-based charities. The above dynamic makes it difficult to fully ascertain how compliant Kuwait's government is with the vast charity work conducted within its borders.

When the Syrian uprising began, Kuwait took a different approach than Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Rather than arming the rebels, Kuwait called for a political solution and pledged humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees.[427] Between 2011 and 2013, Kuwait sent more than $500 million in aid as proof of its commitment, which is the most of any GCC country.[428] While the government focused on humanitarian assistance, Kuwait's Syrian expatriate community of roughly 100,000 collected private donations for the opposition and transferred the modest funds through their vetted contacts inside Syria.[429] As the conflict intensified, the expatriates linked their efforts with professional fundraisers from experienced Salafi charities with access to wealthy Gulf donors.[430] The combination of both paved the way for private donors in Kuwait to make an immediate impact on the opposition. Between 2012 and 2013, Salafi organizations and professional fundraisers with radical leanings hijacked the local initiatives and transformed Kuwait

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[425] United States Department of the Treasury, "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al Qaida Network," news release, June 13, 2008, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1023.aspx.

[426] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 6.

[427] Ibid., 22.

[428] Ben Hubbard, "Private Donors' Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/13/world/middleeast/private-donors-funds-add-wild-card-to-war-in-syria.html.

[429] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 5.

[430] Ibid.

into the rally point for illicit funding in the Gulf region. According to Cohen, by 2013, Kuwait was the "epicenter of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria."[431]

Given the large amount of aid the Kuwaiti government has provided, its leaders have scoffed at the notion that private donations have equated to significant amounts. Yet, according to Elizabeth Dickinson and Joby Warrick, private donors based in Kuwait have sent as much as hundreds of millions of dollars, and a portion of the funds go directly to radical groups with no strings attached or government interference.[432] Ahrar, JAN, and IS, in that order, have been the primary recipients of the private funding from Kuwait's biggest Salafi donors. The remainder of this section will dissect the major donors and analyze how they affected the opposition.

Among all Kuwait's Islamic organizations and networks, the Ummah Party and the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People have had the most influence in transforming the Syrian conflict. The Ummah Party is a Salafist organization founded by Hakim al-Mutayri in Kuwait in 2008.[433] Since political parties are banned in Kuwait, the Ummah Party functions as an Islamic organization and represents a more potent Salafi version of the Muslim Brotherhood.[434] It has branches in numerous Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and has been extremely active in Syria.[435] Based on al-Mutaryri's guidance, the Ummah Party quickly allied itself with the Syrian Salafist group Liwa al-Ummah that conducts joint operations with JAN.[436] Additionally, according to Lund, al-Mutayri was one of the driving forces behind the formation of Ahrar in early 2012 and the establishment of the SIF.[437] He remains one of the biggest donors to Ahrar today.

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[431] United States Department of the Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen."

[432] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 19 and Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say."

[433] "Kuwait Umma Party Formed," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 26, 2008, http://carnegieendowment.org/2008/08/26/kuwait-umma-party-formed.

[434] Ibid.

[435] Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say."

[436] Ibid.

[437] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 30.

In 2012, al-Mutayri named the Salafi cleric Hajjaj al-Ajmi as his organization's point man for Syria.[438] Al-Ajmi is from a wealthy Kuwaiti family and is one of the most public and prolific fundraisers at the private level for Syria. He is one of the managers of the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People, which is a fund that collects donations around the Gulf.[439] Along with al-Mutayri, he was also instrumental in the formation of Ahrar and various Islamist alliances.[440] For example, Ahrar has gone as far as to publicly thank al-Ajmi for sending donations totaling $400,000 in 2012.[441] The Islamist alliance the Syrian Islamic Front acknowledged receiving $600,000 from him in public statements.[442]

Aside from al-Ajmi's regional fundraising efforts through his fund, he has also employed savvy campaigns on Twitter. Prior to his account being suspended, al-Ajmi had roughly 475,000 followers.[443] During crucial time periods in the Syrian conflict, such as sudden advances or attacks by the Syrian military, al-Ajmi would send urgent messages over Twitter with status updates, pictures of dead civilians from the attacks, and a phone number for his followers to donate. He also regularly requested that his followers spread the messages. According to Warrick, the technique has been incredibly successful, and opposition groups in Syria took notice.[444]

In 2013, al-Ajmi and al-Mutayri reached new heights in their effects on the Syrian conflict after the following events. First, in either a show appreciation or to attract support, a Syrian rebel group named itself after al-Ajmi when its leaders posted a video

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[438] Suhaib Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria," *al Akhbar*, March 21, 2014, http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/unknown-role-kuwaits-salafis-syria.

[439] Warrick, "Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Sides."

[440] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 29; William McCants, "Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism," *Foreign Policy*, accessed February 25, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/30/gulf-charities-and-syrian-sectarianism/.

[441] McCants, "Gulf Charities and Syrian Sectarianism."

[442] Joby Warrick, "Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Side."

[443] Miriam Berger, "Twitter Just Suspended Two Kuwaitis Accused By The U.S. Of Financing Terror In Syria," *BuzzFeed*, August 7, 2014, http://www.buzzfeed.com/miriamberger/twitter-just-suspended-two-kuwaitis-accused-by-the-us-of-fin.

[444] Joby Warrick, "Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Sides."

on YouTube proclaiming itself as the "Hajjaj al-Ajmi Brigade."[445] While the event may have been nothing more than a publicity stunt, it serves as an example of how well known and influential al-Ajmi personally became within opposition elements.

Second, when JAN and IS formerly severed ties in 2013, al-Ajmi immediately reached out to JAN contacts and promised to finance the group.[446] This was important because according to *al-Jazeera*, IS provided JAN with a significant portion of JAN's overall budget.[447] In exchange for al-Ajmi's support, he requested JAN appoint a Kuwaiti jihadist, Abu Hassan al-Kuwaiti, as one of its sharia officials, despite Abu Hassan not having the necessary credentials.[448] For a group like JAN that employs a strict vetting process for new members, its willingness to accept al-Ajmi's request is another indication of how important he was as a benefactor.[449] Third, as part of a public relations campaign, al-Mutayri rotated regional officials from the Ummah Party through Syria to take pictures with the rebels to facilitate fundraising efforts. During one of the trips in 2013, a sniper killed Mohammad Abduli, the president of the UAE branch.[450] Following Abduli's death, al-Mutayri took the unprecedented step of establishing a training camp inside Syria in honor of Abduli.[451] It remains the only instance where a private Islamic organization purporting to be a charity of sorts formed an actual training camp inside Syria.

Aside from al-Mutayri's and al-Ajmi's joint efforts, the Kuwaiti organization the Council of Supporters also has facilitated a tremendous amount of money to the Syrian conflict. Additionally, the Council demonstrates the links between Kuwaiti government officials and private funding networks. The Council was created in 2012 to lead

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[445] Warrick, "Private Money Pours into Syrian Conflict as Rich Donors Pick Sides."

[446] Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria."

[447] "Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian Group 'Merge,'" *al-Jazeera*, April 9, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/04/201349194856244589.html.

[448] Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria."

[449] Ibid.

[450] Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say."

[451] Ibid.

fundraising campaigns in Kuwait.[452] While the Council consists of numerous clerics and activists, a current member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly Mohammad al-Mutayri leads it as the secretary general.[453] To illustrate the Council's ability, it was the main force behind a 2013 fundraising campaign that collected an estimated $30 million for Syrian opposition groups, according to Suhaib Anjarini.[454]

While the Council supports numerous Islamist groups, it is a major backer of Ahrar and JAN.[455] One of the Council's board members Nayef al-Ajmi who was the Kuwaiti Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs in 2013 was featured on JAN fundraising posters. While being advertised in conjunction with JAN is not a definitive admission of guilt, al-Ajmi's longstanding ties to jihadist groups and his activity on the Council was enough for the United States to levy accusations at him.[456] In 2014, al-Ajmi resigned his ministerial post after U.S. Under Secretary Cohen used al-Ajmi as an example of how the Kuwaiti government does not appear fully committed to ending unregulated funding.[457] Overall, the Council, al-Mutayri, and al-Ajmi show why it is difficult to delineate exactly where official Kuwaiti support begins and ends with private charitable organizations.

In addition to the above organizations and individuals, three other important personalities functioned as independent Kuwaiti fundraisers for Ahrar, JAN, and IS. The first is Shafi al-Ajmi who was one of the first Salafis to work in conjunction with the Syrian expatriate community in 2011.[458] Al-Ajmi is a well-known academic, Salafi preacher, and expert fundraiser in Kuwait. Thousands of people typically attend his sermons in the mosque on Fridays, and his television show is one of the most popular in

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[452] Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria."

[453] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 10.

[454] Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria."

[455] Ibid and Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 14 and 16.

[456] United States Department of the Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen."

[457] Ibid; Sylvia Westall, "Kuwaiti Minister Accused by U.S. over Terrorism Funding Quits," *Reuters*, May 12, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/12/us-syria-crisis-kuwait-idUSBREA4B0AX20140512.

[458] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 6.

Kuwait.[459] Similar to Hajjaj al-Ajmi, Shafi al-Ajmi is also savvy with Twitter campaigns and had more than 300,000 followers before Twitter suspended his account for terrorism-related financing activities along with Hajjaj's.[460] Shafi al-Ajmi is known for his strong sectarian rhetoric and frequently teamed up with other renowned fundraisers to maximize efforts. However, in 2013, rather than simply providing money to radical groups, he began funding specific operations that he wanted accomplished.

For example, in August 2013, Shafi al-Ajmi and Hajjaj al-Ajmi along with other clerics such as Nayef al-Ajmi from the Council of Supporters conducted a joint campaign to fund an offensive in Latakia, Syria where many Alawites and Shia reside.[461] Islamist groups, to include JAN, agreed to the operation and massacred at least 60 Shia civilians in the village of Hatla purely for sectarian reasons.[462] According to Anjarini, following the attack, JAN proclaimed that it "cleansed Hatla of the Shia" while Shafi al-Ajmi exclaimed the Shia were slaughtered with Kuwaiti supplied weapons.[463] The Hatla massacre is an example of how out of control private Kuwaiti sponsorship had become. In response, the United States formally designated Shafi al-Ajmi, Hajjaj al-Ajmi, and Abd al-Rahman Khalaf Ubayd Juday al-Anizi, who will be discussed below, as key financiers of terrorism in 2014.[464] Of note, the Kuwaiti government has not taken any action against Shafi al-Ajmi or Hajjaj al-Ajmi.

Two other prominent Kuwaiti financiers worth noting are Ghanem al-Mutayri and Abd al-Rahman Khalaf Ubayd Juday al-Anizi. Al-Mutayri keeps a low profile compared to Shafi al-Ajmi, but his efforts are no less noteworthy to supporting JAN. According to

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[459] Zolton Pall, *Kuwaiti Salafism and its Growing Influence in the Levant* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), 18.

[460] Berger, "Twitter Just Suspended Two Kuwaitis Accused By The U.S. Of Financing Terror In Syria."

[461] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 16.

[462] Ibid., 16–17; Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria."

[463] Anjarini, "The Unknown Role of Kuwait's Salafis in Syria."

[464] United States Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Three Key Supporters of Terrorists in Syria and Iraq," news release, August 6, 2014, http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2605.aspx.

Ben Hubbard, al-Mutayri staunchly supports JAN and has amassed as much as $14 million in donations from conferences he organized.[465]

While most private Kuwaiti donors like al-Mutayri seem to favor Ahrar and JAN, al-Anizi dedicates his support to IS. In 2013, the U.S. Treasury Department identified al-Anizi as not only a financier for IS but also a foreign fighter facilitator.[466] While his monetary contributions were not specified, his support to IS predates the Syrian conflict. He has operated out of Kuwait since 2008 and links Kuwaiti donors with IS-related networks in the region. Al-Mutayri, al-Anizi, and all the Kuwaiti donors mentioned above exemplify how extensive Kuwait's private networks have become.

While the government of Kuwait may be committed to humanitarian support, its private and public citizens have brazenly supported the most radical elements in the Syrian conflict. In addition to their financial support, the Kuwaiti donors have also reinforced sectarian identities and promoted just as much fragmentation as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Due to intense U.S. pressure, Kuwaiti officials agreed to make terrorist financing illegal for the first time in 2013 and created a financial investigation unit (FIU) to identify violators.[467] However, given the exceptionally high number of Kuwaiti private donors and organizations as well as their organized networks, it is doubtful the FIU will make any significant impact in the near term. Furthermore, separating charities that support extremists from those who partake in legitimate work will not be an easy task and will also require long-term efforts before any noticeable effects are observed. Lastly, one of the biggest challenges facing the FIU is the means by which Kuwaiti donors send their funds. Along with individuals hand-carrying bags of money into Syria, Dickinson noted that Kuwaiti private donors also use formal and informal exchange companies, which are incredibly difficult to track.[468] Thus, the FIU will need to work closely with regional counterparts to stem the flow of private donations.

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[465] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 9; Hubbard, "Private Donors' Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria."

[466] United States Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Three Key Supporters of Terrorists in Syria and Iraq."

[467] Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, 2.

[468] Ibid., 12–13.

D. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I revealed the multi-faceted nature of external sponsors in the Syrian conflict. While the geostrategic politics of the region, specifically the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, incentivized existing sectarian identities, the rise of radical Islamist groups was not due to a larger existential battle between Sunni and Shia. Rather, in-depth analysis revealed that the most influential external factor that indirectly facilitated the rise of radical Islamist groups was intra-GCC competition, and the most direct external factor was private support from Kuwait.

The Saudi–Qatari rivalry, not the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, favored the growth of Ahrar, JAN, and IS. The irony of the situation is both Saudi Arabia and Qatar did not intend for this to happen. With the exception of Ahrar, radical Islamist groups did not receive direct Saudi and Qatari support. Also, Saudi Arabia and Qatar would not intentionally arm any al-Qaeda affiliate, since groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula regularly call for the overthrow of the Gulf monarchies. Radical Islamist groups benefited more as a consequence of the selective support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar than a deliberate strategic decision. Despite Kuwait's decision not to arm the opposition, its unwillingness to rein in private donors who blatantly supported radical groups made it just as culpable as Saudi Arabia and Qatar for the dysfunction of the opposition, which still continues today. According to Warrick, when Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed to work closer together in 2013, the direct and indirect state support to Ahrar and JAN was drastically reduced.[469] However, private money from Kuwait has enabled both groups to seamlessly maintain their edge over others in the opposition.[470]

To be fair, the GCC countries are not alone in their sponsorship. Other countries are involved as well, but Syria is the GCC's backyard. If any regional alliance needs to accept responsibly, it is the GCC. Unfortunately, their eagerness to see the al-Assad regime overthrown blinded them to the danger of poor policy decisions. Their discrepancies in support further exacerbated the uphill challenges Syria's opposition has

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[469] Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say."

[470] Ibid.

faced since the beginning of the conflict. GCC support at the state and non-state level taught Syria's opposition that the more Islamist and violent they act, the more funding they would receive. In this situation, groups such as Ahrar, JAN, and IS that are already the most radical and best organized stood to gain the most.

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VI.   CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that each hypothesis represents a critical piece to a three-part puzzle that explains the rise of radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict. A combination of ideological resonance, institutional legacies, and external sponsors has given Ahrar, JAN, and IS a significant competitive advantage over the secular opposition. However, even more important than the three variables is how each group has leveraged them, which touches upon a prominent theme in this thesis. Despite all three radical groups being in the same general movement, significant differences exist between them, and an effective strategy to combat Ahrar, JAN, and IS requires an understanding of their nuances. I dissected each hypothesis in Chapters III, IV, and V to identify the limitations of each and to obtain specificity to proffer useful policy recommendations. In this final chapter, I systematically review each hypothesis, present conclusions, and derive policy recommendations.

A.   HYPOTHESIS 1: IDEOLOGY

I addressed why the Syrian conflict presented a fertile environment for radical Islamists to cultivate their ideology in Chapter III. However, ideological resonance was not a given. Ahrar, JAN, and IS maximized the situation through effective diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames as well as media distribution strategies that linked them to potential recruits. The groups wisely tapped into historic grievances while weaving their ideological outlook into a comprehensive narrative, which diametrically opposed the Syrian regime on multiple levels. Yet the nuanced details of the strategies each group employed were not uniform. Disaggregating the strategies revealed fundamental differences, which gave potential recruits options to choose from on the radical spectrum. While some recruits may be attracted to whomever is the most powerful at a given time regardless of ideology, others may base their decisions on how a group portrays itself and how it frames the conflict.

Understanding these differences provides crucial insight into the mindset of the recruits who have bolstered the ranks of Ahrar, JAN, and IS. Generally speaking, those

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who join Ahrar for ideological reasons deliberately choose the median voter option and, most important, reject IS's extreme version of an Islamic state. While Ahrar is still a radical group, its strategic messaging has become more moderate to separate itself from IS's barbarism. For those concerned about the rise of radical Islamist groups in Syria, this is a welcome development. IS has what Herbert Haines refers to as a "radical flanking effect" on Ahrar and to some degree JAN.[471] The radical flank effect is caused when an extreme group affects the perceptions and actions of other groups, making them less radical.[472] The result is the previously unacceptable groups appear more moderate and mainstream by comparison. In the case of Syria, Ahrar has distanced itself ideologically from IS, which is reflected in its framing strategies. JAN's leaders, on the other hand, do not disagree with IS's doctrinal outlook; they simply think it is counterproductive. However, IS's actions have forced JAN to better define its ideological position, which is aligned with al-Qaeda's vision of establishing a global caliphate. This dynamic has made JAN more pragmatic, not necessarily more moderate.

One of the most important lessons the secular opposition can learn from the radical Islamists is to be ideologically consistent in its messaging. Despite the variance among the radical Islamist groups, their actions are consistent with what they say. Furthermore, the radical Islamists reinforce their ideology by providing badly needed public services to locals in the areas they control, which gives them an added level of respect. Organizations like the SNC have tried to appeal to all Syrians. As Islamist groups with increasingly sectarian narratives have become more prominent, minority groups and secular Syrians have received mixed signals. Thus, the SNC appears ideologically incoherent. Additionally, the infighting among groups under the SNC's purview prevents them from establishing any legitimacy at the local level. If the SNC ever hopes to unite its diverse constituency, it must reconcile these contradictions. It must offer equally effective framing strategies as the radical Islamist groups and more robust humanitarian outreach. The international community can help in this regard.

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[471] Herbert Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights," *Social Problems* 1, vol. 32 (October 1984): 32.

[472] Ibid.

1.   Policy Recommendations

The conclusions from Chapter III beg the question of how the international community can counter the radical Islamist narrative. Two initiatives can have an immediate impact in Syria. In many ways, the first is already occurring. There has not been a single prominent Muslim cleric that has spoken in support of IS. The more atrocities IS commits in the name of Islam, the more clerics have rallied against it. For example, when IS placed Jordanian pilot Lieutenant Muath al-Kaseasbeh in a cage and burned him alive in early January 2015, clerics around the Muslim world denounced IS.[473] The international community needs to give these clerics a bigger voice. They have a credibility and legitimacy in Muslim communities that the United States and other Western countries will never have. Rather than give these clerics a global platform to condemn IS and directly challenge IS's theological interpretations, the media tends to place more emphasis on IS's rise, subsequent growth, and war crimes.

Challenging the narratives of Ahrar and JAN is not as easy as challenging IS's. Due to Ahrar's and JAN's willingness to show varying degrees of moderation compared to IS, an ideological counter will be difficult to formulate, and prominent Muslim clerics will not likely condemn them unanimously. Thus, the best way to erode Ahrar's and JAN's ideological legitimacy is to use one of Abu Musab al Suri's strategies against them: provide better humanitarian support than Ahrar and JAN while offering an inclusive ideological alternative palatable to all Syrians.

One of the ways Ahrar and JAN have ingratiated themselves into rural communities is by providing extensive humanitarian services while propagating their ideologies. This strategy has been extremely effective. Governance and humanitarian outreach is proven to be just as important during civil wars as weapons and ammunition. While SNC leaders in Turkey have been failing in trying to unite their diverse constituency, Ahrar and JAN have quietly expanded their support base by providing some semblance of normalcy to people traumatized by the realities of war. Syria's rural

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[473] Vivian Salama, "In Unison, Muslim Clerics Lash out against Islamic State," *Associated Press*, February 6, 2015, http://news.yahoo.com/jihadi-preacher-lashes-against-islamic-state-methods-095147477.html.

communities perceive Ahrar and JAN as honest brokers while those in the opposition resemble warlords carving out their own personal fiefdoms.

While Ahrar and JAN have framed the conflict in religious terms, it was not religion or sectarianism that initiated hostilities. Rather, it was the al-Assad regime's reprehensible actions against children. When the first crowds took to the streets in protest, no one clamored for the death of Alawites or the mass mobilization of Sunni Muslims. The crowds wanted freedom, dignity, and liberty while advancing a nationalist, secular agenda. As the situation escalated, it was long-standing political repression combined with economic frustrations that first bubbled to the surface, not sectarian hatred. To combat Ahrar's and JAN's ideological resonance, give the people want they originally wanted — better governance and access to basic services.

B. HYPOTHESIS 2: EXPERIENCE, ORGANIZATION, AND STRATEGY

I examined in Chapter IV how the institutional legacies of Syria's radical Islamists shaped their current repertoires of contention and mobilizing structures. The remnants of earlier struggles presented Ahrar, JAN, and IS with a ready-made insurgency kit of leadership, manpower, and tactics. These same institutional legacies also provide insight into why the radical Islamists are so resilient. For example, between August and November 2014, the international coalition led by the United States conducted over 1,000 air strikes against IS and JAN targets, yet both groups have maintained command and control over their fighters.[474] While Ahrar has been spared from coalition attacks, it has been on the receiving end of IS's wrath. According to Aron Lund, almost every notable, original Ahrar leader has been killed by IS.[475] Nevertheless, IS's decapitation campaign has not slowed Ahrar's growth, its operational tempo, or its effectiveness.

The main reason is that all three groups are just as rooted locally as externally. Each group entered the conflict with vast amounts of experience, and from the beginning, they worked to intertwine themselves into every level of society. Neither bombs nor

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[474] Richard Sisk, "US, Coalition Executes More than 1,000 Airstrikes against ISIS," *Military.com*, November 26, 2014, http://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/11/26/us-coalition-executes-more-than-1000-airstrikes-against-isis.html.

[475] Lund, *Syria's Ahrar Al-Sham Leadership Wiped Out in Bombing*.

decapitation campaigns alone can eradicate them. Applying Paul Staniland's typologies, which I reviewed in Chapter I, Ahrar, JAN, and IS have all transitioned into the most effective type of insurgent group, namely the integrated group, which is marked by high levels of unity among the leadership, strong command and control of fighters, and an established presence in local communities.[476] These groups have strict compliance up and down the chain the command with minimal levels of dissent.[477] According to Staniland, there are two pathways whereby integrated groups transition into weaker typologies. The first is through a counter-insurgency strategy that combines militarized state-building measures with decapitation campaigns.[478] The second occurs when integrated groups grow too quickly, which results in mismanagement.[479] While options for the international coalition appear somewhat limited to military strikes, other short and long-term solutions can help.

1.   Policy Recommendations

In the short-term, the international coalition needs to continue precision strikes against IS. Taking out key leadership will eventually take its toll. According to the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Stuart Jones, 6,000 IS leaders and fighters have been killed by coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.[480] I showed in Chapter IV that one of the keys to IS's blitzkrieg-style gains since 2013 were innovative tactics employed by former Baathist leadership with prior military experience. Killing them will severely degrade IS's command and control processes. Furthermore, IS's lifeline is its ability to function as a state; keeping its leaders on the run severely inhibits their capacity to issue orders and maintain the mechanisms of an integrated group.

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[476] Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, 6.

[477] Ibid.

[478] Staniland, "Insurgent Organization and State-Armed Group Relations," 37.

[479] Ibid.

[480] "Air Strikes Killed 6,000 ISIS Fighters: U.S. Ambassador," *al Arabiya News*, January 22, 2015, http://english.alarabiya net/en/News/middle-east/2015/01/22/Air-strikes-killed-6-000-ISIS-fighters-U-S-ambassador.html.

For Ahrar and JAN, coalition forces must exercise caution before unleashing air strikes. Both groups have positive relations within the opposition, and any coalition attack needs to be linked to a direct threat. A great example of when to strike was targeting the Khorasan Group and its leader Muhsin al-Fadhli in 2014.[481] Al-Fadhli was a senior-level operative who was in charge of al-Qaeda's Iranian network in 2012.[482] He relocated to Syria in 2013 to join JAN and became the leader of the Khorasan Group, which was a JAN offshoot.[483] The group was part of a larger al-Qaeda initiative to conduct spectacular attacks against the West.[484] When the coalition killed al-Fadhli and other members in his group, it sent a clear message to JAN: if it tries to expand operations outside of Syria, it will be destroyed. Furthermore, when the coalition released information about the Khorasan Group after the attack, opposition leaders could not deny the necessity of dismantling the group.

The last note of caution when employing military options against radical groups is carefully assessing the second and third order effects of any attacks. When a change occurs in the structural dynamic of the Syrian conflict, the shift in the balance of power often leads to a vacuum that is quickly filled by another group. Thus, weakening one has the effect of empowering another. If IS starts to lose control of its fighters, many will most likely attempt to join JAN or even form a more violent group. The international coalition and the Syrian opposition must be prepared for this development. Additionally, if IS abandons the areas it controls, the secular opposition needs to step in immediately and assist the locals with basic services. If these types of contingency plans are not in place, they need to be. All military strikes must be placed within a tailored strategy that accounts for the anticipated effects on the battlefield.

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[481] Mike Levine, James Gordon Meek, Pierre Thomas, and Lee Ferran, "What Is the Khorasan Group, Targeted By U.S. in Syria?," *ABC News*, September 24, 2014, http://abcnews.go.com/International/khorasan-group-targeted-us-syria/story?id=25700467.

[482] Thomas Joscelyn, "Report: Former Head of al Qaeda's Network in Iran now Operates in Syria," *The Long War Journal*, March 25, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/report_former_head_o.php.

[483] Ibid.

[484] Ibid.

Additionally, coalition forces must aggressively increase intelligence collection on the leaders and fighters of the radical groups. I demonstrated in Chapter IV how Ahrar, JAN, and IS are violent mutations of the global jihad movement. Their military prowess is an upgrade from the previous campaigns of their forefathers. Each group has used global, regional, and local networks to emerge and grow. Experienced jihadists who have forged relationships through battle-hardened experience constitute the connective tissue linking these networks together. The same jihadists fighting in Syria today represent the next generation of leaders in the global jihad movement. After the Syrian conflict subsides, some may go back to their lives, but history has shown that some will continue their jihadi struggles on a global scale. Documenting their background and connections now will pay dividends later to intelligence services around the world that are united in fighting the global terrorist threat. A comprehensive database of the foreign fighters in Syria as well as the who's who in Ahrar, JAN, and IS is an absolute necessity.

C.   HYPOTHESIS 3: EXTERNAL SPONSORS

I showed in Chapter V how the Saudi–Iranian rivalry incentivized sectarian identities on all sides of the Syrian conflict. I also demonstrated how Saudi and Qatari support to the opposition directly and indirectly facilitated the rise and growth of radical Islamists from a resources perspective. Last, I revealed how Kuwait's private donors had the most direct impact in financing radical Islamist groups. The implication from Chapter V conclusions is regardless of whether it was intentional or not, all three countries undermined Syrian opposition unity by fostering group fragmentation and made the chance of negotiated settlement unlikely in the near term by disproportionately empowering the radical groups. In a typical sponsor–proxy relationship, the sponsor can force the proxy to the negotiating table, but on the surface, the Syrian radical Islamists appear immune to the influence of their sponsors.

For example, the United Nations has repeatedly tried to persuade the Syrian government and the opposition to engage in peace talks in Geneva, Switzerland.[485] Of

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[485] Basma Atassi, "Explaining the Geneva II Peace Talks on Syria," *al Jazeera*, January 19, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/explaining-geneva-ii-peace-talks-syria-2014118142853937726.html.

all the opposition elements, the groups most resistant to any discussion of peace are the radical Islamists. Ahrar informed *al Jazeera* that even if all sides agree to a peace deal, it would continue fighting.[486] JAN provided a similar response while the Islamic Front alliance released a statement that all participants from the government and the opposition would be placed on a wanted list.[487] Given that IS is the most uncompromising of all the groups, its leaders would absolutely reject any notion of peace. Civil war scholars such as Fotini Christia refer to the radical Islamists in this situation as spoilers for conflict resolution because they have no incentive whatsoever of ending the conflict and will do everything in their power to disrupt peace talks.[488] However, scrutinizing how each group has responded to sponsor support between 2011 and 2013 provides a slightly different assessment of the situation.

1.   Policy Recommendations

Ahrar, JAN, and IS have all displayed different types of reactions to the materiel and financial assistance from external sponsors. Ahrar has been the largest recipient of state and non-state level sponsorship from the Gulf countries among the radical Islamist groups. A major reason is that Ahrar took active measures to moderate its discourse and tactics to attract more external support. For example, Ahrar does not conduct suicide bombings that are the hallmark of JAN and IS.[489] Scholars such as Lund have suggested that Ahrar's leaders choose not to because they want to avoid angering important private donors, such as Adnan al-Arur who is staunchly opposed to the tactic.[490] Additionally, when Ahrar joined the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) in late 2012, it released an organizational charter that avoided using the word "jihad" in it.[491] According to a SIF spokesman, it was intentional: "We do not want Western opinion makers to base their

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[486] Atassi, "Explaining the Geneva II Peace Talks on Syria."

[487] Ibid.

[488] Christia, "What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict," 10.

[489] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 20.

[490] Ibid.

[491] Ibid.

information on [Islamic] stereotypes, or on people who portray us as radical groups."[492] The SIF's and Ahrar's decision to do so occurred during the same general time period when the United States designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization. It is highly probable that Ahrar and its Salafi allies wanted to avoid the same label, which would have impeded their external support.

Out of all three groups, Ahrar is currently the most reliant on external support to maintain its battlefield effectiveness. It has also been the most willing to adjust its behavior on the battlefield based on sponsor preferences. The inference is of all the radical groups, Ahrar would most likely respond to GCC sponsors if they demanded Ahrar negotiate. Thus, leveraging economic instruments of power through key regional allies would be more effective to influencing Ahrar's behavior than direct military confrontation.

Unlike Ahrar, JAN sought to diversify its streams of revenue to decrease reliance on external sponsors. Its leaders learned this lesson in 2013. Initially, JAN received half of its operating budget from IS; however, when JAN refused to merge with IS in 2013, IS's financial support ended.[493] Private donors in Kuwait, such as Hajjaj al-Ajmi, provided much needed assistance following the JAN–IS split, but JAN also began searching for other sources of income. When the European Union lifted the Syrian oil embargo in 2013, JAN immediately began taking over oil wells in the Dayr al-Zawr region to sell the oil at cut-rate prices.[494] The independence JAN gained by earning its own income coupled with money from private donors that contained no government interference enabled JAN to continue fighting the way it saw fit. Additionally, JAN's military strategy of coordinating operations with groups funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar meant it could still indirectly reap the benefits of GCC state-level support without being bound to Saudi or Qatari influences.

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[492] Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, 18.

[493] "Iraqi al-Qaeda and Syrian Group 'Merge,'" *al-Jazeera*,

[494] Ardan Zenturk, "The EU's Misguided Decision To Lift Syrian Oil Embargo," *Al-Monitor*, May 27, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/05/eu-decision-lift-oil-embargo-misguided-syria-war.html.

Based on JAN's response to the loss of IS funding, its leaders understand that they need resources to continue fighting, which is a weakness the coalition can target. Assisting Kuwait with stemming the flow of private donations to JAN will negatively affect the group. Additionally, working with the international community to improve oversight on oil sales from Syrian sources will further degrade JAN's ability to self-sustain its operations.

Of all three groups, IS is the least reliant on external sponsors to survive, and there is no external entity that controls it. IS initially used funding from private external sponsors the way an entrepreneur treats money from angel investors in a start-up situation.[495] Once IS established itself in Syria, it created its own war economy to be self-sufficient and uninhibited to fight the way it wanted to, which provides some insight to its ultra-violent methods.[496] According to Richard Barrett, IS brings in up to $3 million per day through illegal oil sales and taxes it collects from those in its territory among other activities such as ransoms from kidnappings.[497] Thus, there are no known sponsors that can influence IS.

Still, from an economic perspective, restricting oil sales originating from Syria and implementing oversight on who sells and purchases the oil will make it more difficult for IS to continue profiting at its current levels. One of IS's biggest weaknesses, aside from its extreme actions, is it needs money for its governing initiatives. The more the international community can restrict the flow of IS revenue, the more difficult it will be for IS to govern, which is key to its legitimacy.

All of the above analysis points to the same general conclusion—all external sponsors to the Syrian opposition need to coordinate efforts and work in tandem. The GCC has provided a staggering amount of materiel and financial support, but it has been

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[495] Robert Windrem, "Who's Funding ISIS? Wealthy Gulf 'Angel Investors,' Officials Say," *NBC News*, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/whos-funding-isis-wealthy-gulf-angel-investors-officials-say-n208006.

[496] "Islamic State: Who Supports the Jihadist Group?," *BBC News*, September 1, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29004253.

[497] Barrett, *The Islamic State*, 45.

irresponsibly applied. While significant damage has already been done, it is not too late to adopt a corrective path.

D.   FINAL THOUGHTS

The Syrian conflict has been a tragedy of epic proportions. With more than 200,000 dead and at least ten million people displaced, which accounts for half of the pre-war population, Syria is no longer the same country it was before the uprising began.[498] Additionally, the al-Assad regime has lost its legitimacy to govern. Syria has become a failed state. Despite the opposition's insistence that Bashar al-Assad step down from power, his removal will not change anything in the country. The opposition still appears hopelessly divided, and radical Islamists continue to grow. However, like all civil wars, the Syrian civil war will end, just not quickly. According to Barbara Walter, since 1945, civil wars on average last roughly 10 years.[499] Using Walter's metric, Syria is in the middle stages of the conflict, which is a sobering reality. When the conflict ends, the international community must be prepared for the humanitarian catastrophe. It also needs to be ready for how to deal with the radical Islamists who have risen to their highest levels out of any event in modern history.

The Syrian conflict transitioned from protest to insurgency to civil war. Thus, numerous theoretical frameworks applied in this thesis. I combined elements from social movement, radicalization, and insurgency theories as well as civil war literature to examine ideological, organizational, and resource-based hypotheses. My conclusions go beyond simply stating that all hypotheses apply. Rather, this thesis demonstrates how each is invariably linked to the rise of radical Islamist groups and how each hypothesis reinforced the other. This thesis also shows that understanding how each group and hypothesis relates to the Syrian milieu is more important for purposes of specific policy recommendations than a parsimonious assertion.

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[498] "The War in Syria: Can Hell Be Frozen Over?," *The Economist*.

[499] Barbara Walter, "The Four Things We Know About How Civil Wars End (And What This Tells Us About Syria)," in *The Political Science of Syria's War* (Washington, DC: The Project on Middle East Political Science, 2013), 29, http://pomeps.org/2013/12/19/political-science-and-syrias-war/.

When I began this study a year ago, one of the biggest challenges was the Syrian conflict represented a moving target with an evolving landscape. The danger of proffering recommendations was the situation could change and render any conclusion irrelevant. However, I demonstrated that the rise of Ahrar, JAN, and IS in the Syrian conflict was not a spontaneous event: it was deliberate and carefully orchestrated. Each group has gradually built upon their original foundation. Thus, understanding their rise in the context of their operating environment leads to key insights to eventually defeat them.

In conclusion, the rise of Ahrar, JAN, and IS in the Syrian conflict was multi-faceted. A dynamic approach must be used to defeat them. All instruments of national power—diplomatic, military, informational, and economic—must be leveraged. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote of the necessity of knowing yourself and your enemy and the imperative of attacking your enemy's strategy.[500] This thesis provides a solid baseline to understanding the nuances of our current and future enemies as well as their strategies. The next step in this project is to formulate tailored strategies that combine lessons learned from battling radical Islamists in other conflicts with the unique attributes of Ahrar, JAN, and IS. Just as Syria's current batch of radical Islamists represent violent mutations of the global jihad movement, our strategies to defeat them must be equally innovative and precise.

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